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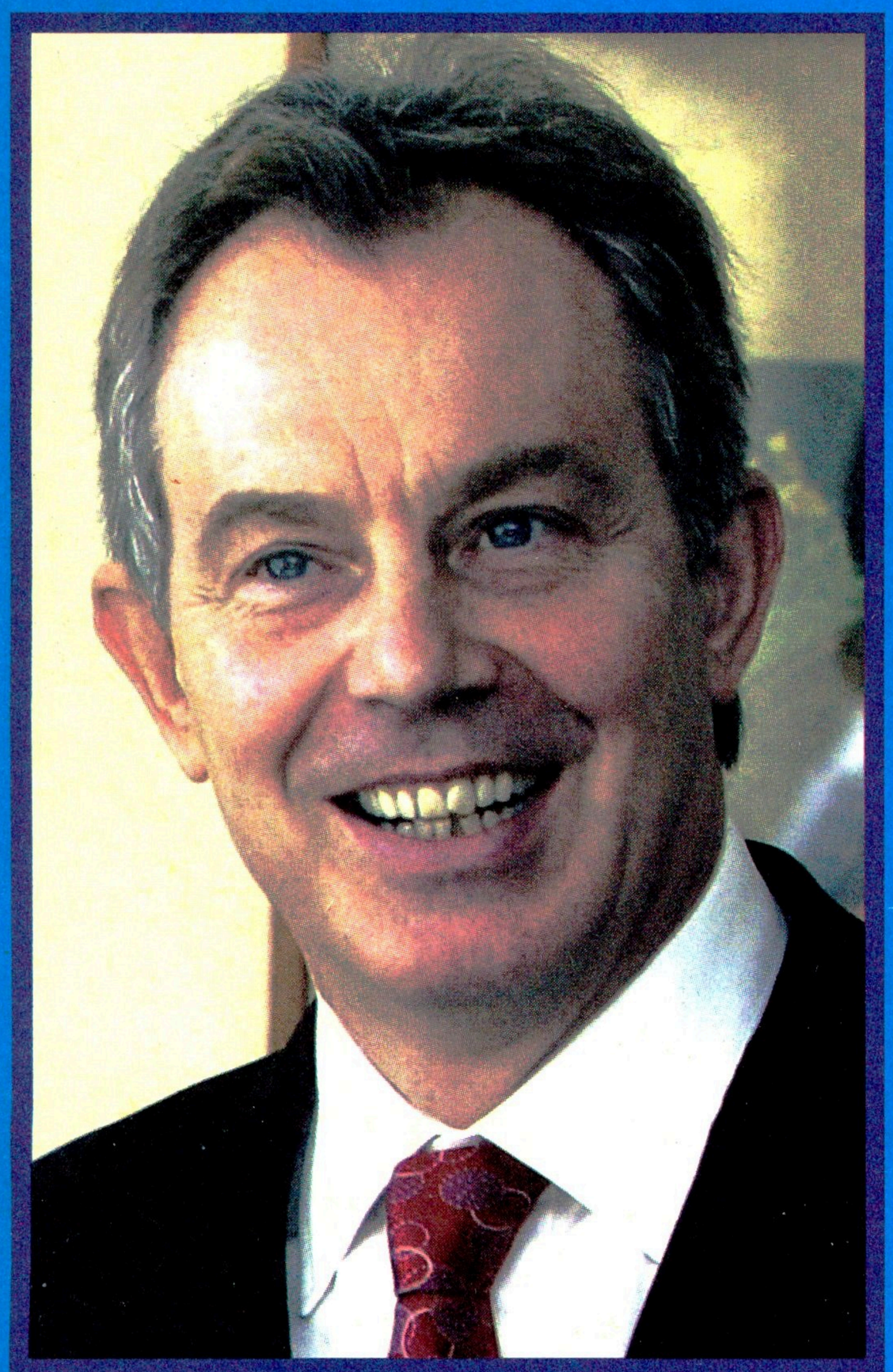

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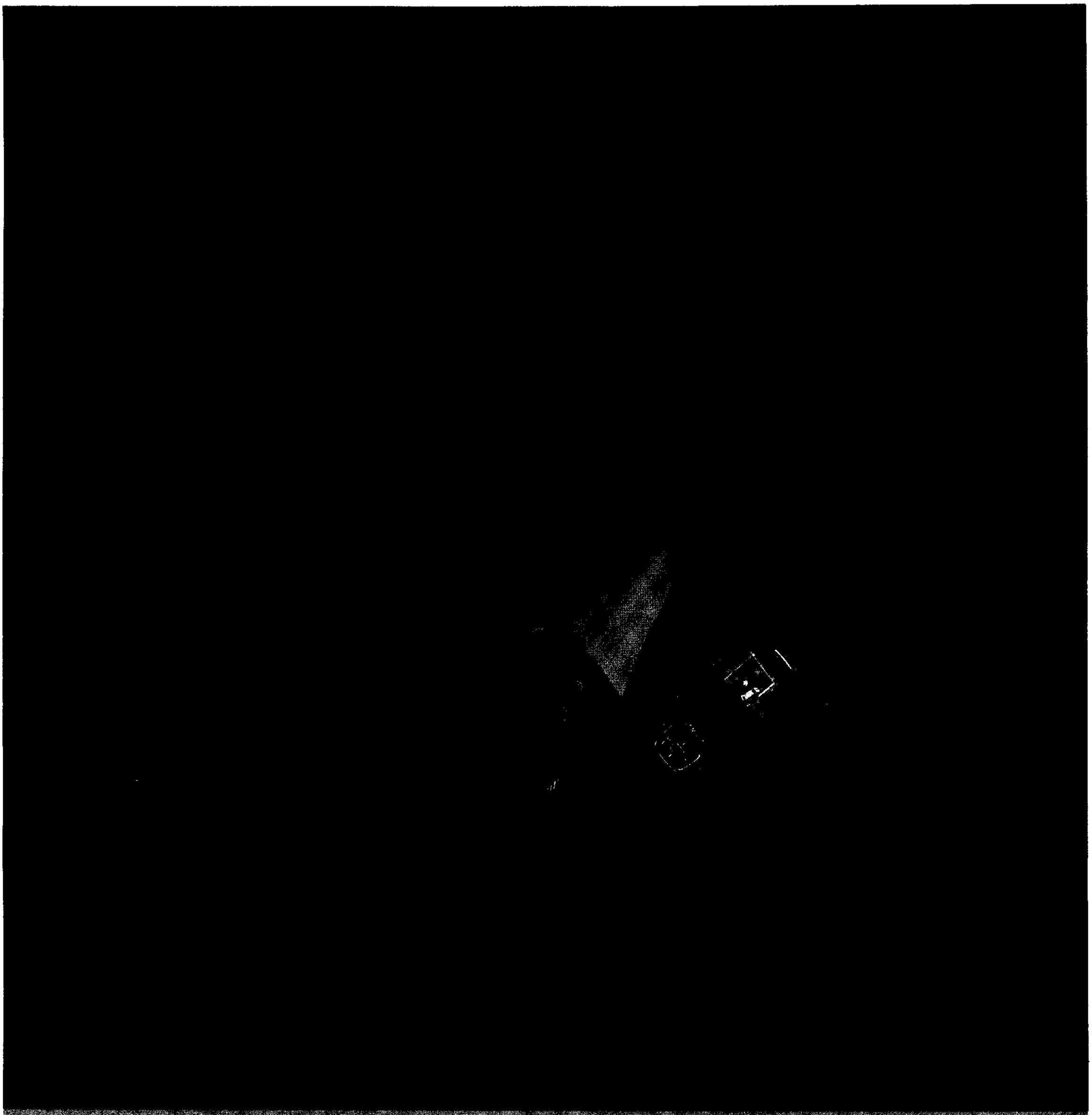

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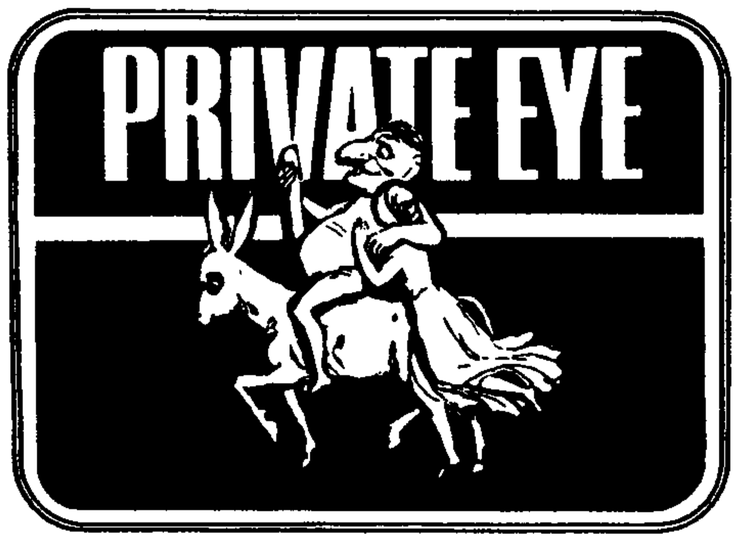

Extraordinary edition

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"NEW" Labour's desperation to win support for its education white paper is showing.

The party's political services unit has sent all Labour MPs a "toolkit" for launching the policy in their constituencies, including ready-written letters to school governors and parents and a Powerpoint presentation to give to public after-school "forums" on the future of schooling over the next few months.

A set of "talking points" is provided to stimulate discussion at these forums, posing questions such as "what can we do to give parents more say in your child's education?" and "what can we do to make sure every child gets to go to the good school they want to? [sic]"

But even with such heavily loaded questions, Labour clearly isn't confident that the right things will be said. Luckily, the author of the toolkit's press release – designed for MPs to "personalise" and send to their local papers after they have held local meetings – already knows exactly what parents will say.

The press release reads: "<<INSERT PARENT NAME>>, a parent at the event, said 'The government's plans are really ambitious. I'm pleased they want to give parents control... but I was even more pleased that <<NAME>> MP and the head bothered to take time out to listen to my views'."

NEXT ISSUE: End-of-year special – including £250 prize Jumbo Crossword.

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ABC

DESPITE the best efforts of Simon Heffer, the *Daily Telegraph* eventually came out for David Cameron. It could hardly do otherwise, given how many Cameroonies work at the paper.

Telegraph columnist Alice Thomson wrote a long, adulatory profile of "Dave" last Saturday – though she forgot to mention that she and her husband Ed Heathcoat Amory are close friends and neighbours of the boy-wonder, as leading lights in the New Age cult known as the Notting Hill Set.

The *Telegraph*'s most eminent pundit, Ferdinand Mount, did declare his interest in a column the previous day. After praising Cameron as "the only party leader or would-be party leader who is prepared to offer some incentive for marriage", he added: "This article, I should add, is itself a rare example of family values in action, since it carries the usual health warning 'David Cameron's mother is my first cousin' – a superb reason for supporting him, but not the only one."

Not all that rare an example, actually. Another of Cameron's cousins, Harry Mount, is the *Daily Telegraph*'s New York correspondent and was until recently deputy editor of its comment pages. Against the massed ranks of metropolitan toffs, poor Heffer – a humble Essex lad – never stood a chance.

PERHAPS the most radical part of Lord Turner's pension proposals is the National Pensions Savings Scheme, under which contributions will be placed in a publicly-run fund.

This has the potential not only to be much cheaper than private schemes but also to reverse the financial services industry's stranglehold on pensions brought about by the unleashing of personal pensions on to an unsuspecting public in the 1980s.

The prospect of taking the most important financial service people will ever use out of the hands of the firms who mis-sold millions of pension policies (not to mention endowments and a host of other scams) has naturally attracted the most vocal opposition from the pensions industry, which believes organising retirement income is its inalienable right.

Stephen Hadrill, director general of the Association of British Insurers, spoke for the vested interests when he announced that "we don't need to create a new, expensive and risky state quango – we should use the expertise and infrastructure of our existing private sector to put this vision into effect". The irony of the representative of the companies that have ripped off millions over the last two decades describing a state scheme – which would face public scrutiny rather than a supine regulator – as "risky" somehow escaped Mr Hadrill.

IN LAST weekend's TV documentary *How to be Tory Leader*, Michael Portillo reopened an old feud with William Hague by complaining that Hague's staff – "paranoid pygmies" – had briefed against him while he was shadow chancellor.

But, Michael Cockerell asked, hadn't Portillo's staff been briefing against Hague? "On one or two occasions very junior people who thought they were associated with me did bad things," Portillo replied.

This sounds like a reference to Malcolm Gooderham, who in 2001 urged a hack to publish photographs of protesters shadowing Hague wearing lookalike masks, images that would inevitably embarrass the Tory leader. "It's very funny," Gooderham told the *Mirror*. "Those pictures would be worth finding."

Gooderham was not a "very junior" person who merely "thought" he was associated with Polly Portillo: he was his press secretary. But when the *Mirror* disclosed that the disloyal suggestion had been made, and Hague duly asked his shadow chancellor to sack Gooderham, Portillo refused.

BRITAIN'S indiscreet former man in Washington, Sir Christopher Meyer, clearly has little time for Tony Blair's chief of staff, Jonathan Powell.

"We want you to get up the arse of the White House and stay there," Meyer crudely quotes Powell in the opening sentence of *DC Confidential*, the former's much-hyped memoir.

Clearly irked that the man who was once his junior in the Foreign Office was now giving him orders, old Red Socks blames Powell and Alastair Campbell for trying to sideline him during the crucial Bush-Blair pow-wows over the Iraq war.

Elsewhere he speculates about "how it was that the powers that be decided to send me to Washington". In fact it was a last-minute intervention from the "odious species" of staff that operated out of Number 10, who decided Washington needed a more outgoing, media savvy type than the man then in line for the top job, the straight-laced Sir Jeremy Greenstock, who was instead packed off to the UN.

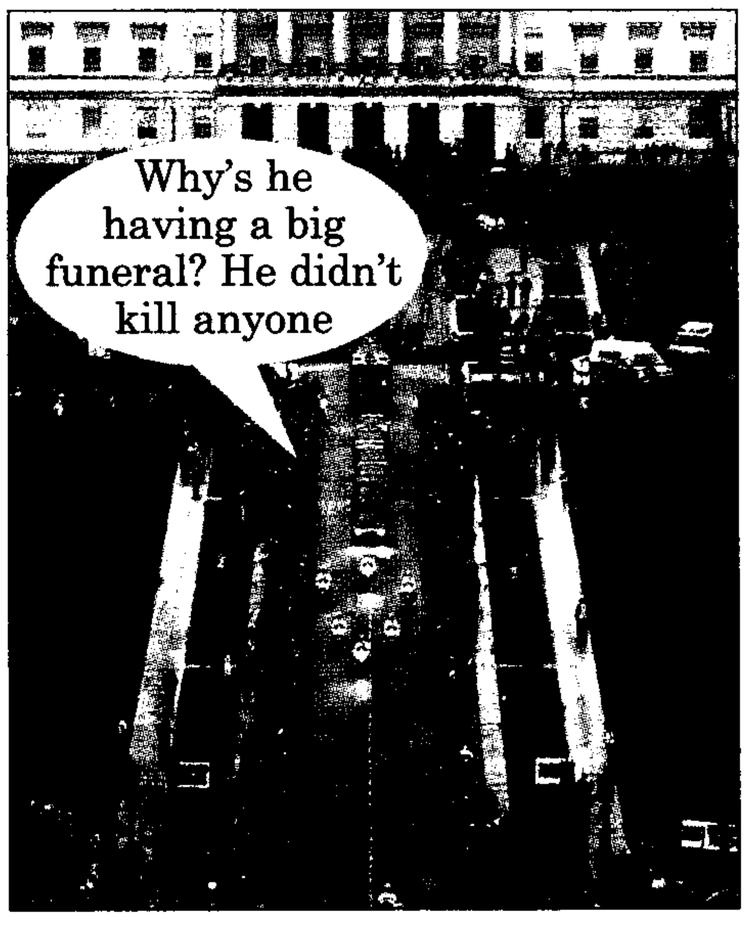
Because Red Socks had to be hastily pulled back from his new posting in Berlin, Paul Lever, another top flight diplomat, suddenly found himself on a flight to Germany. So who was this Red Sock-supporter in the Blair camp? None other than Jonathan Powell. So much for gratitude.

IN THEIR anxiety to capture the nation's response to the death of George Best, all the television news programmes – BBC, ITV and, repeatedly, Sky – singled out one particular fan's demonstration of devotion at West Ham's Upton Park ground.

He had made up a flag bearing Best's name, with the four letters placed in the four squares around the cross of St George. Just in case the point was missed, the centre of the cross contained the red clenched fist of the Irish paramilitary terror group The Red Hand of Ulster.

In the light of recent legislation about glorifying terrorism, no doubt the broadcasters can expect treble prison sentences all round.

ULSTER SHOCK



NEWS

"SIR Richard Branson, the billionaire entrepreneur, is to take on the might of Rupert Murdoch by creating a giant television, internet and telephone company," the *Sunday Telegraph* revealed breathlessly last weekend. "Sir Richard plans to merge Virgin Mobile with NTL, the huge cable television company, in a £4.5bn deal that will give access to television screens in more than five million homes."

Only much later in the story did the *Telegraph* acknowledge that, strictly speaking, the plan was for NTL to acquire Virgin Mobile rather than vice versa. But this hardly mattered, apparently, since the new company would acquire the "exceptionally powerful" Virgin brand-name. One unnamed investment banker said: "It's the battle of the brands – Virgin versus Sky."

No one reading the *Sunday Telegraph*'s scoop could doubt that Virgin was likely to win, since Sky "does not have a mobile phone arm and could find that its customers are lured away to the new wide-ranging Virgin entertainment group. Sky could see defections accelerate if Sir Richard wins the right to broadcast live premiership football."

Unsurprisingly, the coverage in Monday's *Times* (prop. R. Murdoch) had a rather different tone. NTL's proposed takeover of Virgin Mobile "has drawn a lukewarm response from the City", it sniffed. "Doubts are already being expressed about whether the new group, dubbed 'VirginVision', will see its ambition through to reality."

But even observers not employed by the Dirty Digger may feel that this Bransonian hype deserves some scepticism. Remember his promises to transform the condom market with Virgin Mates, the soft drinks market with Virgin Cola, the utilities market with Virgin Power, the budget airline market with Virgin Express and the cosmetics market with Virgin Vie?

And what of his new partners? There are serious risks for what remains of the Virgin "brand image" (so beloved by rail commuters) in being associated with NTL, which spent itself into insolvency and then, leaving original shareholders for dust, announced a merger with the only slightly less hopeless cable company Telewest. Since the NTL-Telewest deal won't be completed until the middle of next year, is the company ready to cope with another mammoth "merger"?

NTL's performance is so pisspoor it has spawned numerous dissident websites, including ntlhell.co.uk and nthellworld.co.uk. Both are notable for the large number of NTL employees who log on to sympathise with the tens of thousands of customers complaining about NTL's hopeless billing systems and dire technology. By Monday morning, in a taste of what's to come for Sir Richard, one enterprising NTL comment site had already got VirginHell.co.uk registered and up-and-running.

Why, then, was the *Sunday Telegraph* story so gushingly one-sided and doubt-free that it might as well have been written by Branson himself? Alert readers of the paper may already have their own theories. Above the front-page splash ("Branson Takes on Murdoch in Media Battle") was a huge panel puffing the new *Telegraph* promotion, in league with a well-known airline: "SAVE UP TO 55% ON FLIGHTS WITH VIRGIN ATLANTIC."

Fancy!

"THE government is committed to improving the payment culture in the UK in order to create fair and stable business transactions, and the government's own payment performance is an important element in this policy," Trade Secretary Alan Johnson told the House of Commons recently, unveiling a league table drawn up by the Department of Trade and Industry which ranked 46 Whitehall departments on the efficiency of their invoice payments.

"Nice day for it"

In 31st place, with a failure rate of 10 percent, was the Treasury. The DTI itself came 42nd, failing to meet payment deadlines in nearly 13 percent of cases.

NOT A LOT of people know that the new Freedom of Information Act covers the Post Office – and that's exactly the way the Post Office likes it.

Its "statutory publication" scheme, listing all public documents, is nowhere to be found, nor is any detail about its obligations under the act. When the BBC was preparing a story about recent cases of "mail hoarding", Nicola Beckford of the BBC's FOI unit tried to speak to the mail service's FOI officer so she could make a request. Under section 16 of the act, all public authorities have a duty to "advise and assist" inquirers to formulate their query. For example, they should provide information on how the organisation stores and manages data.

The Post Office provides no contact details for its FOI officer, so Ms Beckford called the press office. It refused to tell her the name of the openness officer. "If you want to make a request then submit it to us in writing, but we don't have a statutory duty to help you," said Post Office spokesman Nick Martin.

Good to see the traditional Post Office attitude to customer service has survived into the freedom of information age!

NEWS FROM THE SANDPIT

ACCORDING to one of the biggest private security contractors used by the Ministry of Defence in Basra, the British army no longer controls major parts of the city, now known by some wags as Tehran's most western suburb.

The Iraqi police, who are supposed to be operating alongside us Brits, are in fact operating road blocks and checkpoints to keep us *out* of the areas most in need of reconstruction. Seventy percent of the police force is thought to be under the control of militias backed by Iran; and they are not about to surrender any territory.

Pro-Iranian Shiite thugs operating in the south of Iraq can expect $20,000 to $30,000 bounties from Iranian intelligence for killing British soldiers. Indeed many of the militias themselves are actually Iranian. Many arrived here in 2003 in the run-up to the first Shia pilgrimage to Karbala. As the pilgrims arrived, thousands of Iranian troops from the Al Badr Brigade, an elite undercover unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard composed of Iranian, Iraqi and Afghan troops, crossed the border and moved into Nairiyah, Najef and Karbala, as well as Basra.

Initially mobilised to fight Saddam, many of them are still here, training and supplying Shiite militias intent on killing British squaddies. And guess what. Their sponsors, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, based in Tehran, also has an office in… London!

'Square Basher'

Street Of Shame

"SCROOGES!" shrieked a shocked *Daily Mirror* in December last year, over the news that "only one in three workers will get a free Christmas bash from their firms this year."

The paper approvingly quoted Derek Simpson, leader of union Amicus: "This is the time of year when employers should be thanking staff for their hard work and the contribution they've made to the business over the past 12 months – not cancelling Christmas."

Last month employees of Trinity Mirror were informed by chief executive Sly Bailey that the company would no longer fund any staff Christmas parties. But this may not be quite such a cost-saving as she imagines. The *Daily Mirror* had already paid a Park Lane hotel a deposit of £4,000 for its Christmas-party booking – which it has now forfeited.

Bailey saved another announcement for the beginning of the festive period: on 1 December staff on Trinity Mirror's regional titles were told that dozens of them are to be made redundant.

TO THE Groucho Club for former *Daily Telegraph* editor Martin Newland's leaving dinner last Wednesday, where his former loyal deputy Sarah Sands announced to the assembled throng that "it is hard to dislike Martin" before demonstrating quite how effectively she had overcome this difficulty by spending less than a minute on her valedictory speech and exiting the building before the first course had been served.

Rather than dwell on what he called "the worst two years of my life", Newland chose to focus his own speech on his future career, which he predicted much to his former colleagues' surprise would be spent… at the Telegraph group.

Forseeing a time when proprietors the Barclay Brothers tire of recruiting their senior executives en masse from the *Daily Mail*, he took his leave with a phrase borrowed from his muscular movie role model Arnold Schwarzenegger – "I'll be back."

BACK in 2003 the *Sun* ran an aggressive campaign against "Labour's abject failure over asylum cheats", during which much ordure was heaped on the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett.

Sun editorials dismissed him as "daft" and readers were advised that the "*Sun* fears for Home Secretary's sanity" after a furious Blunkett publicly condemned the *Sun*'s "Asylum Madness" campaign for its "hysteria" and "racism".

But now – thanks to the supply of a very large cheque – relations are rather more cordial: *Sun* readers can look forward to "Mr Blunkett's candid and insightful analysis of the week's events". And the former loony is clearly enjoying his new role at the home of hysteria and racism, telling readers: "I'm looking forward to getting my teeth into my new column for *The Sun*".

CONGRATULATIONS to Richard Desmond, whose "ongoing relationship" with showbiz couple Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey – a series of specially shot covers and exclusive interviews over a 12-month period purchased in August at a price of $200,000 to aid sales of his dismal American edition of *OK!* – is reaping great dividends.

At the end of last month Simpson and Lachey announced that they are divorcing – in the pages of *US Weekly*.

HACKWATCH:

Best and worst...

LIKE the Queen Mother's demise, it was a moment for which Fleet Street had long prepared itself. In the event, however, George Best was inconsiderate enough to miss his mortal deadline. Impatient to get cracking with their obituaries, the papers decided to go ahead and run them anyway on Friday 25 November while he was still alive. The *Times* cleared more than seven pages. The *Daily Telegraph*, not to be outdone, gave him a front-page story, the whole of pages 2 and 3, plus a 12-page souvenir supplement. Both the *Sun* and *Mirror* had eight-page pull-outs as well as dozens of other pieces in the news and sport sections.

All of which gave editors a small problem when Best did indeed die later that day: what more could be said? The solution was to recycle the previous day's clichés. In the *Sun*, Friday's back page had the headline: "Thank You Bestie For The Magic." The headline on the next day's back page? "Thanks For a Million Magical Memories."

"There ought to be nothing left to say about George Best," Paul Wilson admitted in the *Observer* on 27 November. Fortunately, there was "one thing that cannot be repeated too often... Best was unique". *Times* sportswriter Simon Barnes certainly couldn't repeat it too often: "George Best was the greatest footballer who ever lived. Let us be perfectly clear about that... Best was the best... There was nobody like him... There has never been anybody as good as Best and there never will be. It is not possible. Best exhausted the medium."

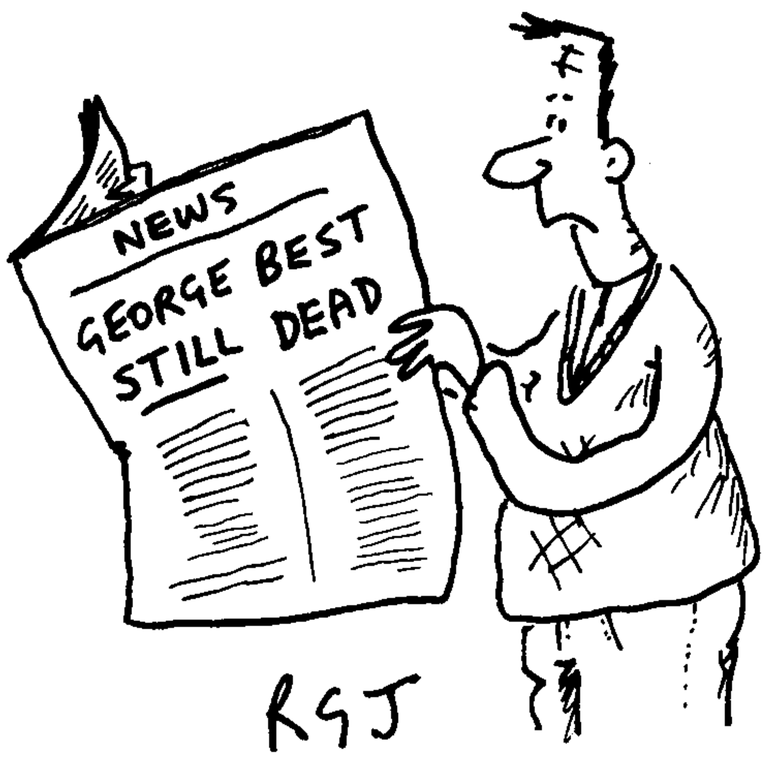
He exhausted the hacks, too. Of course they could call him a "flawed genius" (*Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mirror*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Mail on Sunday*) – or, by way of variety, "a deeply flawed genius" (*Daily Express*), "the paradigm of the flawed genius" (*Times* obituary), "the definitive flawed genius" (*Sunday Times*), "a wayward genius" (*Daily Star*), "the grinning, wayward genius from Belfast" (*Evening Standard*). And, of course, they could all recall the famous joke. "No tribute to George Best would be complete without reference to the anecdote in which Best is asked, when lying on a bed engulfed by champagne, money and Miss World, 'Where did it all go wrong?'" the *Independent on Sunday*'s media diary complained. "One electronic library reveals it has been retold 177 times in the past 12 years." And in that issue of the *Sindie*, how did football correspondent Steve Tongue begin his tribute? With the very same anecdote.

But this still left a lot of space to be filled with flights of lyrical fancy. "Best was poetry in motion," Jeff Powell raved in the *Daily Mail*. "If Pele was the Einstein and Maradona the Napoleon, then George Best was the Michelangelo of the round ball, the artist of the playing field. Football was his gallery..." For Simon Barnes in the *Times*, "Best's extraordinary skill was as much a reflection of his singular nature as Van Gogh's was of his".

According to the *Observer*'s editorial, he was "the Beatles and Elvis combined" – an analogy which was stretched to breaking point by Martin Samuel in the *News of the World*. "Here is another way to remember George," Samuel advised his readers. "Go to a record shop, buy a copy of *The White Album* by the Beatles. Find a song called 'Helter Skelter', track six, side three. Put it on. Play it loud. Really loud. Upset the neighbours."

Er, why? "What the Beatles were doing to popular music in those four minutes and 29 seconds, Best did to football in the 1960s... From the blistering frenzy of 'Helter Skelter' came heavy metal and, much later, punk. From the sainted feet of George Best came football as art, as revolution... The greatest artists, musicians, writers, painters may produce a lifetime of work, but there is usually a frozen moment in time when the vision is at its most powerful... So put the needle on the record and hear those first searing chords of shredded guitar string..." And so on, for an incredible 1,100 words.

When all else failed, hacks sought divine



inspiration. "It seems inadequate, now, to refer to him as one of the finest footballers the world has seen," opined John Sadler of the *Sun*, describing Best as "a scrawny kid whose genius was blessed in heaven". Paul Hayward, the *Mail*'s new £200,000-a-year sportswriter, justified his salary thus: "Best the footballer, Best the magician, who God seemed to have christened in line with his status in the game. George Best. The Best." (Never mind that he was christened George, not Best, and that God didn't choose his surname anyway.) Former footballer Derek Dougan, in the *Sunday Times*, explained why players such as Beckham and Rooney couldn't be mentioned in the same breath: "All of them were manufactured on this earth, but George, I've always believed, was sent to us from heaven. He had to be."

And now George himself is in heaven, according to Fleet Street's finest. "His free spirit – that vital essence of his genius – has joined Bobby Moore, Garrincha, John Charles, Johnny Haynes and the rest of the boys under Sir Matt Busby's management in Heaven's 1st XI," Jeff Powell informed *Mail* readers. "It is the Devil's defenders who are crying." Or, as James Mossop wrote in the *Sunday Telegraph*: "Now he is up there, aloft, kicking a ball about with Danny Blanchflower, Bobby Moore and the rest of them. He was no saint but the angels will welcome him."

The certainty of his place in heaven seems rather surprising. "Here was someone who had drunk himself to death after years of alcoholism," Melanie Phillips noted in the *Mail*. "He was highly promiscuous, cheated on his wives and was prone to violence, including attacks on women." But most hacks euphemised their way round this little difficulty. In the *Mail*, which deplores binge-drinking and thuggery, Ian Wooldridge hailed "dear George" as "a maverick whose later life was a two-fingered salute to even the outer margins of political correctness". The *Sun*, which has campaigned against domestic violence, declared that "he was more than just his talent on the pitch... He was a fantastic, full-on character who inspired enormous devotion".

Even, it seems, from those with no interest in football. "I too may shed a tear as he is laid to rest," Yasmin Alibhai-Brown revealed in the *Independent*, citing the reaction to Best's death as further proof of "the feminisation of Britain... and a good thing too". The only people not joining the "collective mourning", she claimed, are "the professional cynics and ex-public schoolboys who still believe stiff upper lips are a mark of evolutionary superiority", thus displaying their "emotional illiteracy". What of the women he beat up, who might not all wish to join the general ululation? Since she failed to mention them, presumably they too can be dismissed as cynical public schoolboys. As was Best's father, Dickie – scolded by Alibhai-Brown for displaying a "stiff, controlled, inhibited British sensibility" which "belongs to an earlier era, when real men did not cry or scream or reveal the chaos in their hearts".

Thanks, Yasmin. No doubt Best's father feels thoroughly ashamed of himself.

and more...

FLEET Street's hyperbolic lyricism about George Best was bad enough (see Hackwatch). But it could have been even worse.

Observer Sport Monthly editor Jason Cowley, who fancies himself as a literary gent, was moved to write this panegyric: "'Thou wert the morning star among the living,/Ere thy fair light had fled;/ Now, having died, thou art as Hesperus, giving/ New splendour to the dead.' Shelley's words on the death of John Keats may be applied equally to the passing of George Best."

Alas, this was too much even for the *Observer*'s sport-mad editor Roger Alton – who personally vetoed it.

"NO ONE but George Best himself is to blame for his wretched plight," intoned the *News of the Screws* in a sombre editorial five days before the ex-Manchester United footballer passed on.

"However, just 12 hours before the ailing legend was connected to a life support system, he authorised the release of the harrowing pictures we print today as a warning to others. By doing so – in what may be his last days – George recovers some integrity and self respect."

It was good to see the *Screws* entering into the same spirit of integrity and respect by retaining the copyright of its Best deathbed photos – so any publications that wanted to use the pics themselves "as a warning to others" would first have to fork out a hefty syndication fee.

JUST FANCY THAT!

"It seems that George Best has sold us all another dummy and might recover." – *Daily Express*, 2 November.

FOUR years ago, George Best's son Calum told the *Sunday Mirror* that he spoke to his father on the phone "a few times a year... Every once in a while I get a call from him, maybe if I've been hunting him down and he feels he has to call. It's pretty brief but I'm used to it." As a young boy, he pointed out, he only ever got to see his dad once a year in England. "He wasn't around."

Then, in 2003, Calum's mother Angie gave the *Sunday Mirror* a long interview. During his visits to London as a boy, she revealed, "hanging out with dad meant going to the local pub. Most of the time George would get drunk and forget he even had his son with him." She also savaged George for writing a recent article accusing Calum of running up bills on his credit card. "How dare he humiliate his son like that? What other father would have behaved like that? Calum was so, so hurt..."

So how did the *Sunday Mirror* filled its front page last weekend after George Best's funeral? With a photo of Calum Best shedding a tear, alongside the headline: "THE *BEST* DAD EVER".

Number crunching

500,000

■ Crowds predicted for George Best's funeral by newspapers in week after his death

75,000

■ Number that actually turned up

Street Of Shame

Continued...

WITH the *Observer* following the *Guardian* into the new hamburger, sorry berliner format, management at Guardian Newspapers Limited (GNL) are lavishing money like never before in a bid to excite and win over staff to what is a do-or-die move for both titles.

In October, a giant beano was held at a local nightclub where a free bar, food, casino and dancing acts were all laid on. Lord Gnome's spies report that the thirsty hacks that night acted like kids in a sweet shop. When asked how much the bash had cost to hold, one GNL executive replied bluntly: "About half a dozen jobs."

Then, at the end of last month, *Observer* hacks were ferried in coaches to the nearby British Museum which had been hired so editor Roger Alton and GNL chief executive Carloyn McCall could present their "vision" for the paper. (Presumably, the *Obs*'s own internal presentation rooms weren't grand enough.) The lead turn was Alton's hyperactive speech in which he outlined the marketing strategy behind the paper's new *Women's Monthly* magazine. "The idea behind *Observer Sport Monthly* was that it should appeal to people who didn't like sport; the idea behind *Observer Food Monthly* was that it should appeal to people who weren't really interested in food; so for the *Women's Monthly* magazine, we're hoping it's going to be popular with people who like to hang around Old Compton Street."

SMIRKS and sniggers in the *Sun* newsroom last week when one of the paper's Dublin correspondents, Michael Sharkey, filed the following story for the *Sun*'s Irish edition:

"Camp telly presenter Brian Dowling has admitted that he fancies *EastEnders* hardman Grant Mitchell. The Kildare-born star is a huge fan of the BBC1 soap – and especially the character played by hunky actor Ross Kemp. Brian, 27, confessed to *New!* magazine: 'I can't drag myself away from *EastEnders* at the moment, and I'm loving the return of the Mitchell brothers. But then I do fancy Grant Mitchell. I definitely would! He's the kind of guy who wouldn't take you to dinner – he would just take you back to his place and devour you. God, I miss that in a man'."

Funnily enough, this important revelation was not published. But if the relationship between Rebekah Wade and husband Ross Kemp deteriorates to the stage where she gives him the boot, no doubt he'll be pleased to know that at least someone out there loves him.

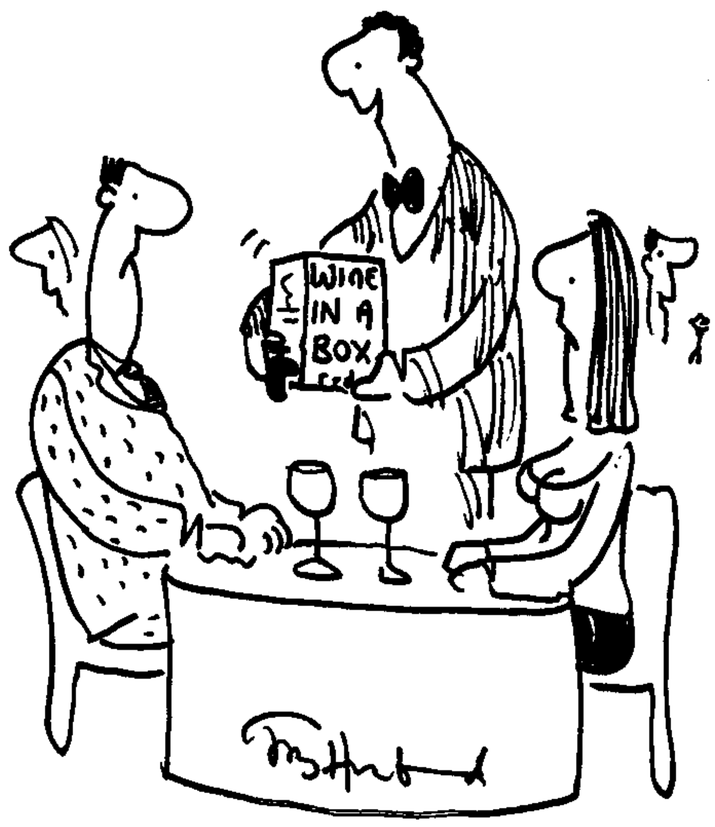
AFTER more than 10 years in residence at the Travellers' Club, thirsty political sage and *Indy* columnist Bruce "the Brute" Anderson is no longer to be found there.

London's gossips have put forward various theories about why Bruce has upped sticks, ranging from "credit problems" to "impending marriage". One recent caller at the Pall Mall club was told he had "re-located to Egypt or America".

In fact, should the treasurer of the Travellers' wish to track him down he can be found in digs in Cambridge, putting together a biography of the late Tory MP Julian Amery.

A LENGTHY *Observer* profile of Carol Thatcher two weeks ago noted that "for years, Carol had a difficult personal life, including an affair with Jonathan Aitken. When he ended it, Lady Thatcher is said to have remarked that she would be damned if she was going to give a job to a man 'who made Carol cry'."

But there was more to her "difficult personal life" than Jonathan Aitken. Although the paper omitted to mention it, another disastrous love affair at the time was with the *Grauniad* hack Roger Alton – now the editor of the *Observer*.



"Would sir like to try the wine?"

NOTHING is certain in this world except death, taxes and that the *Daily Express* will put a picture of Princess Diana on its front page on Mondays.

The paper, which increasingly appears to report news from a parallel universe inhabited only by editor Peter "Mentally" Hill and Mohamed Fayed, trumpeted a new "Diana Death Crash Sensation" on 28 November, although as ever it was difficult to make out what it actually was.

The one new piece of information amid the usual flimflam about blood swaps and spies was that "yesterday lawyers at the Strasbourg-based European Court of Human Rights confirmed that the French government must answer key questions by February 6" – something which seems unlikely, since not only was the previous day a Sunday, but the court had not been in session for the previous three days either. While Mohamed Fayed claims to have petitioned the court to consider his right to a judicial inquiry into Diana and Dodi's deaths, the matter does not currently appear anywhere in the court's schedule of pending cases – which may explain why no other newspaper followed up the *Express*'s "Dramatic Breakthrough in Paris Smash Inquiry".

The paper surpassed itself seven days later, however, with this Monday's splash: "Diana's Death Threat". "Princess Diana was the target of a chilling death threat months before she died", the paper breathlessly revealed. "Simone Simmons, her therapist, told Scotland Yard officers investigating Diana's death in a Paris car crash how the Princess asked her to listen in to a phone call from a mysterious figure at Westminster who threatened Diana over her involvement in a campaign to ban landmines."

Would this be the same phone call that Simmons described to the *Mail on Sunday* in January 2004, and reiterated at length in her ironically-titled book *Diana: The Last Word* last July? Yes, as even the *Express* was forced to admit several paragraphs into its spectacular scoop. And what did the *Express*'s editorial column have to say about Simmons' claims when *The Last Word* was serialised in its rival, the *Sun*, five months ago? "It is time for these ludicrous allegations to stop. As for Ms Simmons, we trust that her claims will be treated with the contempt they deserve."

JUST FANCY THAT!

"John Redwood MP complained to the Press Complaints Commission that an article published in the *Daily Mirror* on 2 April 2005 headlined 'He's not human... don't vote for him' was inaccurate in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Code. The complaint was not upheld."

– PCC report, November 2005.

AD NAUSEAM

NEVER one to keep his own counsel on the state of the advertising industry, Martin "Shorty" Sorrell, head of WPP group, used a recent conference in Barcelona to attack rival advertising networks for resorting to "desperate" and "irrational" measures in their attempts to win new business.

This came just weeks after one of his own agencies, JWT, went as far as to reconstruct a branch of Sainsbury's in its Knightsbridge offices in a bid to wrest the Sainsbury's account from AMV. Needless to say, such desperate and irrational behaviour didn't win them the pitch.

KATE MOSS's cocaine shame has, with eerie predictability, proved to be just the fillip an ageing supermodel's career needs.

One month after it was reported that she had lost modelling contracts worth £4m, suddenly labels are clamouring to sign her up again, with Burberry claiming that it never sacked her in the first place and Virgin Mobile enlisting her services for a new year ad campaign. Amazing what a month in rehab – plus a *Vanity Fair* cover and a spot guest-editing *French Vogue* – can do for a girl's reputation.

2006 WILL also see Tesco launch a cross-media splurge on its new online eDiet service, which tells customers what foods they should buy to fit their chosen diet routine.

Tesco will be spending heavily on TV sponsorship as well as a full through-the-line campaign. But if Tesco is really so keen to help customers lose weight it might instead pay more heed to last week's National Consumer Council report, which hammered every single one of Britain's supermarkets, including Tesco, for failing to meet the NCC's targets on promoting healthy foods.

Thirty-five percent of Tesco's promotions are for fatty and sugary foods – more than twice as many as for fruit and vegetables. If Tesco made more effort to cut prices on healthy foods, there would be less need for schemes such as eDiets. But then eDiets is to be a paid-for service.

AN advertising feature in a recent issue of *Radio Times* about Nestlé's noble work with down-trodden coffee farmers in El Salvador had many poverty campaigners choking over their lattes.

It described how coffee farmer Adán Humberto Flores Galan had joined the Nescafé Partners Blend project, a "fair-trade" co-operative which, said Nestlé, aims to help coffee farmers diversify, improve their product and receive a "fair price" for their harvest.

Not long ago, the feature gushed, life was very different for farmers like Adán. They suffered "the devastating pressure that low coffee prices put on his family's livelihood"; and Adán was forced to sell his family's possessions to survive. Alas, Nestlé (turnover: £38bn) didn't have space in the propaganda feature to explain its own role in helping force down those prices.

With the other big coffee roasters Kraft, Procter and Gamble, Sara Lee and Tchibo, they buy half the world's coffee beans. The lifting of restrictions on the international coffee trade, exposing it to the full force of the free market, along with the monolithic purchasing power and outrageous profiteering of the coffee roasters, has seen the price of coffee fall by almost 50 percent in recent years to a 30-year low.

As Oxfam's "poverty in your coffee cup" campaign shows, the livelihoods of about 25 million small producers around the world are under threat. So Nestlé's boast that is now helping 200 El Salvadorean farmers – while all well and good for them and their dependants – does nothing to help the other 23,288 El Salvadoreans who aren't in the scheme, let alone the millions worldwide who are at the mercy of the market.

AS THE chancellor continues to ignore the multi-billion pound costs that he is widely expected to face over the next few years from challenges to tax rules under European law, his departments still won't let on how much is at stake – though they're becoming increasingly confused about why they should keep it secret.

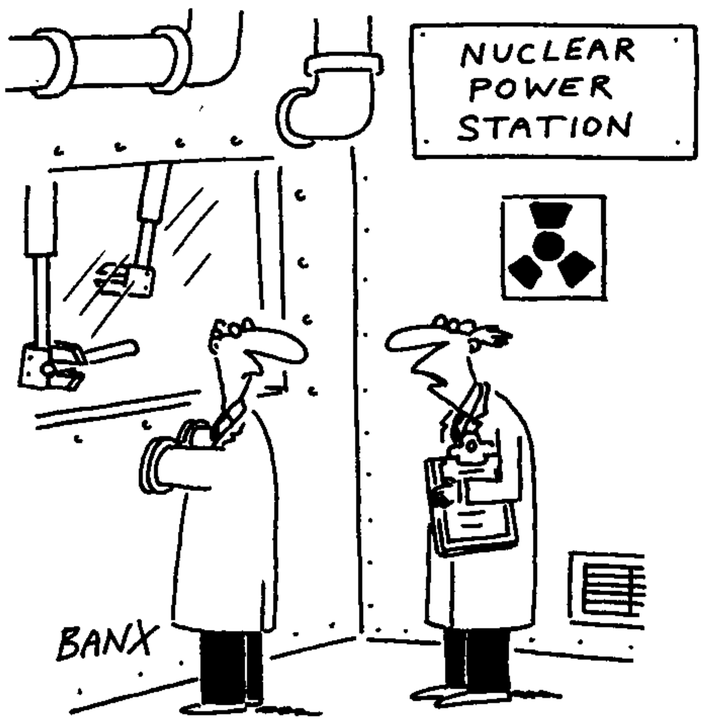
Back in June HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) admitted to the *Eye* that it has estimated what the costs might be but refused to disclose the figures until it had decided whether it would be in the public interest to do so (see *Eye* 1136). Eventually, after months of delay, HMRC has concluded that exemptions within the freedom of information laws allow it to keep quiet, though it did reveal that two defeats sustained in the European Court of Justice so far have cost £247m.

But when it comes to the costs of forthcoming cases, which are likely to prove even more expensive, HMRC told the *Eye*: "Disclosure could affect financial markets and/or increase cost of government borrowing…" If true, astronomical sums are indeed at stake and Brown's budget arithmetic is seriously flawed.

Since the *Eye* brought this up others have begun to probe. *Accountancy Age* magazine asked the Treasury for the same information and was also refused, but for different reasons. *AA's* reporter was told that he couldn't have the figures "because the information would or would be likely to prejudice relations between the UK and another state and an international organisation or an international court" – something HMRC hadn't mentioned. Beyond a general objection on the grounds of "economic interests", the Treasury (which might be expected to know more about these things than the tax collectors) made no suggestion that the financial markets or government borrowing costs would be hit.

That two closely-related parts of government can produce such different justifications for keeping the figures secret may indicate their desperation not to see another hole in the chancellor's finances exposed. But even the toothless Freedom of Information Act doesn't include "might expose embarrassing omissions from Gordon's figures" among the many excuses allowed for withholding information. So they have to come up with something else.

Meanwhile, the *Eye* is off to the Information Commissioner to see what he makes of it all.



"We've split the atom and most of the Cabinet"

"IT'S good to be back," George Galloway announced on being sworn in as the Respect MP for Bethnal Green after the May election, pledging that in the House he would represent "the people that New Labour has abandoned" and "speak for those who have nobody else to speak for them… the trade unions, the immigrants, the poor people, the people who prefer peace to war."

These countless constituents may be wondering how his ambitious project is going. Well, he has tabled a grand total of one written question since the election. He has spoken in the Commons a mere four times. And he has voted in 18 out of 112 divisions – a strike rate of 16.1 per cent. True, there are some MPs who have entered the lobbies even less often – the speaker and deputy speakers (who aren't allowed to vote), the Sinn Fein MPs (who can't vote either, as they refuse to take up their seats), Tony Blair (*who he? – Ed.*) and the seriously ill Labour MP Rachel Squire, who had a brain tumour last December and then suffered a stroke immediately after the general election.

Apart from them, Gorgeous George holds the honour of being the most consistent absentee. No doubt the "people that New Labour has abandoned" are suitably impressed.

GALLOWAY was swift to act, however, following the heavy-handed intervention of the attorney-general in the affair of the secret memo which revealed America's apparent desire to bomb the studios of al-Jazeera television.

Galloway rushed out a statement in which he promised he would "demand that the government confirm or deny that President George Bush intended to bomb the al-Jazeera television station in Qatar at the time of the assault on Falluja." As he said on his party's website: "This is an intolerable attack on press freedom and I hope other MPs as well as the National Union of Journalists will join me in my campaign to get to the bottom of this."

Curiously Galloway has so far failed to put any questions to the government on the matter. Nor has he managed to sign either of the early-day motions lodged by Peter Kilfoyle last week demanding that the government publish a full transcript of the supposed discussion between Bush and Tony Blair – unlike 38 of his parliamentary colleagues who *had* managed to do so by the end of last week.

JUST FANCY THAT!

"It remains independent and will continue to be independent. It is the independent Office for National Statistics and again I think it is an unfortunate allegation that somehow it is not independent."

– Chancellor Gordon Brown denying to Parliament that he had lent on the Office of National Statistics to reclassify expenditure in a way that helped him meet his economic golden rule, 22 March 2005.

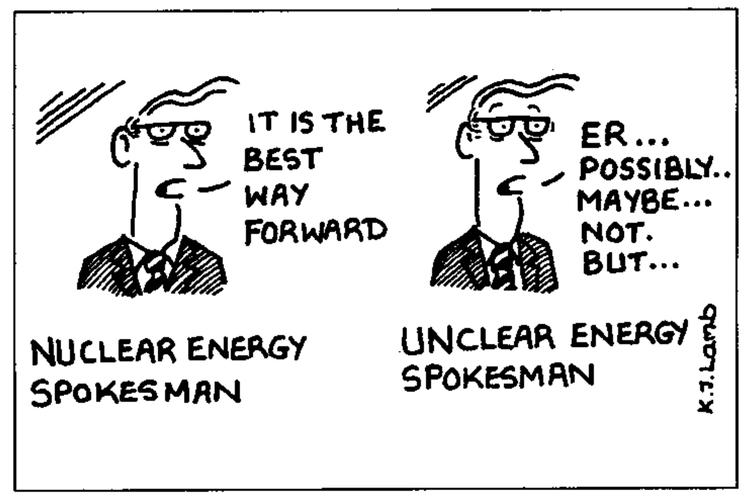
"Having reviewed the framework for national statistics, I propose to legislate to make the Office for National Statistics independent of government."

– Chancellor Gordon Brown to CBI conference, 28 November 2005.

DURING his campaign for the Tory leadership David Davis made much of his business credentials. The fact that he came from a council estate in south London and rose to become a director of the sugar giant Tate & Lyle was proof positive of his commercial and financial genius.

Rather less attention – none at all, in fact – was paid to another of his former directorships, at the hotel group Buckingham International plc.

Buckingham was launched in the late 1980s by father-and-son tycoons Nurdin and "Nick" Jivraj, a controversial duo who are no strangers to



Eye readers (see *Eyes* 844, 871, 885). Davis joined the board in October 1989 at the behest of the then Buckingham chairman, Sir David Hardy, who was also a director with Davis of Tate & Lyle and the Globe Investment Trust. The latter two directorships are mentioned in various Davis biographies. So why is he so reticent about mentioning Buckingham?

When Davis was appointed, the company was facing a £6m legal action from Geoff Mitchell and Louis Holloway, who had sold their company, Worldwide Corporation, to Buckingham. Worldwide made the thousands of Worldwide hand dryers seen in pubs, clubs and restaurants the length of the UK.

Mitchell and Holloway had been promised a further payment of between £5m and £6m; but the board of Buckingham, of which Davis was a leading light, simply ignored their pleas for what was legally theirs. The pair took legal action but at a crucial juncture the evidence on which the judge would make a decision about the size of the payment due to them was destroyed in a fire. The loss of the documents meant that the judge was only able to award them £3.7m.

In summing up Mr Justice Harman criticised the "highly successful spoiling tactics" used by Buckingham. "If litigation is about the obtaining of justice at a fair trial it is equally clear that the process was wholly obstructed," he added. "I entirely accept the lamentable history of the litigation set in the opening pages of this judgment, which show Mr Mitchell and Mr Holloway were very badly treated by the board of Buckingham International plc. They were promised payment of a purchase price based on a perfectly sensible formula and were then met with resort to heavy artillery from very skilled solicitors to prevent them obtaining what had been promised. They could, and morally should, have been paid a proper price several years ago."

Despite winning every single court case both here and in the US Mitchell and Holloway never received a penny from Buckingham. The company collapsed in 1995 with debts of more than £70m, having already been in breach of its banking covenants for several years.

Both Mitchell and Holloway lost everything fighting Buckingham. Mitchell now lives in Spain and is suffering from incurable bone cancer, which doctors say was brought on by the stress of the litigation. Holloway lives in Kent and is an undischarged bankrupt.

When David Davis resigned from the board of Buckingham, chairman Sir David Hardy thanked him for his "wise counsel and international experience". When Hardy himself resigned several years later he said of his paymasters, the Jivraj family, "They'd assured me they were not up to skulduggery, but the Takeover Panel satisfied me they were."

Number crunchings

£13,000

- Increase in annual salary which some MPs are demanding
- Starting salary of residential social worker

EU-phemisms

We will give up the rebate a period after the election

BRUSSELS SPROUTS

WHAT to do about the European Union's dismal economy, whose high unemployment, low growth and stagnant productivity leave the Eurozone miles behind the US, where average income is a third higher?

In Brussels there are regular hand-wringing conferences that agonize over this economic malaise; but given the power of vested interests within the EU – and its determination to continue paying massive agricultural subsidies – nothing is ever actually done.

Back in the summer of 2003, for example, a team of experts under the leadership of macro-economic academic Professor André Sapir came up with specific plans to fire up the embers in the dying grate of European enterprise. Sapir's team dared to suggest that, without having to increase spending, it might be a good idea simply to redirect spending from within the EU's existing budget of £70bn. The rumour was that the economic gurus privately wanted regional funding grants to be re-prioritized and for taxpayers' money to go where it would be of most economic benefit.

This so shocked the vested interests who like things as they are that at the start of the year, as the new commission of José Manuel Barroso replaced that of Romano Prodi, Sapir – who had been advising the European Commission for 12 years – was pushed out of office and his contract not renewed.

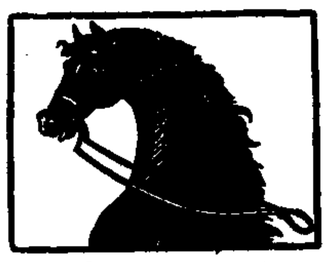
Oddly enough at a recent seminar called "A road to prosperity", a beaming Barroso stood beside the professor and, with one gesture after another, gave every sign of supporting him. He seems to have forgotten Sapir's dismissal entirely – or perhaps he knows that when it comes to economic reform of the EU, it's all talk anyway.

PS: For the 11th year running the European Court of Auditors has refused to sign off the EU's £70bn annual accounts for 2004. According to Hubert Weber, head auditor, the "vast majority of the payment budget was again materially affected by errors of legality and regularity in the underlying transactions". So no change there either.

Mr Ainsley spent his childhood in Worcester, attending the Royal Grammar School before winning a musical scholarship to Maudlin College, Oxford.

Worcester News

Down on the Farm



RECENT weeks have joined Britain's best-loved racehorse, the most famous survivor of the foot-and-mouth crisis and our much loved farming minister, Margaret Beckett, better known to her many admirers as Rosa Klebb, in a delightful picture of modern Britain.

On 1 November, when 10,000 racegoers flocked to Exeter Racecourse to see the return to the turf of Best Mate, three times winner of the Cheltenham Gold Cup, they were horrified to witness the legendary 10 year old pulling up towards the race's end and dying of a heart attack.

As the racing world went into mourning, the racecourse authorities announced that, as happened with Red Rum and other famous horses, Best Mate would be buried next to the winning post. But Devon trading standards officials sternly stepped in to point out that this would no longer be legal. Under the EC's animal by-products regulation, 2002/1774, Best Mate would have to be incinerated and dumped in a landfill site. Brussels' reasoning is that animals apart from domestic pets can no longer be buried in case they pass on mad cow disease: a disease which EU officials somehow imagine can infect horses.

Meanwhile in Cumbria a not dissimilar drama was unfolding around the fate of an almost exact contemporary of Best Mate. Mr Universe was a 10-year-old prizewinning ram which had become the cherished companion of its owner Moira Linaker, a farmer and grandmother. In 1999, when Mrs Linaker lost her son, it was to Mr Universe she turned for comfort. In 2001, as she described in her book about the foot-and-mouth crisis, Behind Chained Gates, she barricaded herself and her sheep into her cottage to save them from slaughter. Last summer, when her ram fell mortally sick of throat cancer, Mrs Linaker slept beside him in the field until he died.

Her dearest wish was that he could then be cremated, so that his ashes could rest in an urn on her cottage mantelpiece. A Defra official assured her that, after the cremation, Mr Universe's ashes would be returned to her. But when they never turned up, she rang Defra to ask what had happened. It was out of the question, they said: "All sheep carcases contain specified risk material"; and under the EC rules, they must be rendered down to powder, incinerated and then taken to a licensed landfill site.

The last word has now come from Mrs Beckett herself, in the House of Commons. Asked about the fate of Best Mate, Rosa intoned, with all the chilly moral superiority of which she is such a master, that "Regulation 1774/2002 bans burial as a disposal route for animal by-products" and that "in our view a racehorse is clearly a working commercial animal and not a pet". So the horse and the sheep must go to their anonymous graves: just in case they infect the world with a disease neither of them can catch.

'Muckspreader'

HIGH PRINCIPALS

THE past few months have been – as usual – grim for the Student Loans Company (see *Eyes passim*). The organisation's former chief executive won £35,000 compensation plus costs for unfair dismissal – five years after his death from cancer.

Ronald Harrison's executors continued litigation he started in 1996, after being sacked for allegedly fiddling his expenses and ordering SLC staff to help his son move home. The evidence for these claims came in a series of anonymous letters.

At Scotland's Court of Session (the SLC is based in Glasgow), Lord Hardie finally ruled that Harrison had been the victim of a malicious smear campaign and identified the author of the letters as his loans administration director, Ron Carthy, who held a grudge against his boss.

The judge went on to describe evidence given during the case by the then SLC chairman Kenneth Young as "at times defensive and at other times evasive" and suggested that Young had scapegoated Harrison to help deflect criticism over the SLC's endemic computer problems.

THE *Times Higher Education Supplement* revealed a leaked document last month showing how Leeds Metropolitan University's vice-chancellor Simon Lee had cancelled all leave during a two week "staff development festival" and threatened to sack those who didn't take part in the event next year. "It is difficult to see why we should continue to employ those few who do not wish to play an active role within the festival," he wrote.

The festival takes place in late August/early September, a popular time for lecturers, especially those with children, to take annual leave. "Fun" events on this year's compulsory training fortnight included a two-hour singing workshop, a talk from Hilary Benn MP and a bike ride, as well as sessions on marking assessments and "wellbeing at work". Unions Natfhe and Unison say the enforced participation turns what could be a positive event into mass bullying of staff.

One thing not mentioned in the *THES* report was that Leeds Met was one of four finalists for "employer of the year" in the inaugural *Times Higher* Awards later in the month.

CHARITY NEWS

THE new Chief Executive of Barnardo's, Martin Narey, the former head of the troubled National Offender Management Service, wasted no time in affirming his commitment to the charity's "inspiration and values" which recognize the "unique worth of every person" while "encouraging everyone's unique talent".

Alas, the charity seems to have forgotten the "unique" value of its very own research and development team. For while Narey was travelling around the UK meeting Barnado's staff, around 20 people in R&D were rung up in their open plan offices and told there was to be major restructuring – and, yes, some jobs would go before Christmas.

Those whose jobs were under threat could apply for voluntary redundancy or fight it out for seven replacement posts. Those off sick were telephoned at home. There was no prior warning and no offer of advice or support to those threatened with the chop. The department's five principal officers were told they too would be made redundant, but they could apply for three new posts.

A discretionary six-month consultation exercise was reduced to just three weeks and the researchers' protests and suggested alternative options were rejected. It was, it seems, a done deal with just the illusion of a voluntary redundancy scheme.

"Cherie Blair's Christmas pudding has to contain a lot of cash"

HEALTH PRIVATISATION SPECIAL

An Awfully Big Misadventure

WHILE many NHS trusts are lumbered for decades with PFI contracts that even the Department of Health's own head of capacity planning recently described as "awfully grand monuments that are starting to give us a real problem", there are strong signs that the days of building giant PFI hospitals are over.

Recent major contracts have all received underwhelming interest, with deals at Whipps Cross and Derriford stalling when the number of bidders on each was reduced to one, while other trusts such as South Devon are having to conjure up a competition between just two bidders. But with bidding for one of the hugely complex deals alone now coming in at an average £11m and plenty of other opportunities in both the public and private sectors, the construction industry's ambivalence is hardly surprising.

Add to the malaise a highly critical report in the last fortnight from the NHS Confederation of health authorities bemoaning the inflexibility, bureaucracy and cost associated with large hospital contracts, and it's no wonder that, while she insists its business as usual for PFI, even Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt appears to be reining in her ambition.

Earlier this year the DoH told the *Eye* that there would be 10 new PFI hospital deals signed this year, but with three weeks to go the figure stands at four. Meanwhile projects ready for sign-off by the trusts and the contractors, such as the new Portsmouth hospital, have been languishing in the department's private finance unit in Whitehall awaiting approval for months.

Among the difficulties identified in the NHS Confederation report was the unsuitability of PFI as a means of renovating the generation of hospitals built in the 1960s and 70s that "require urgent attention". One theory doing the rounds in the NHS is that these crumbling structures present a great opportunity for the government: under the auspices of recently-introduced "capacity reviews" they can be ditched rather than done up, allowing much "business" to be transferred to more fashionable treatment centres, including those of the independent variety that the government is so keen to encourage.

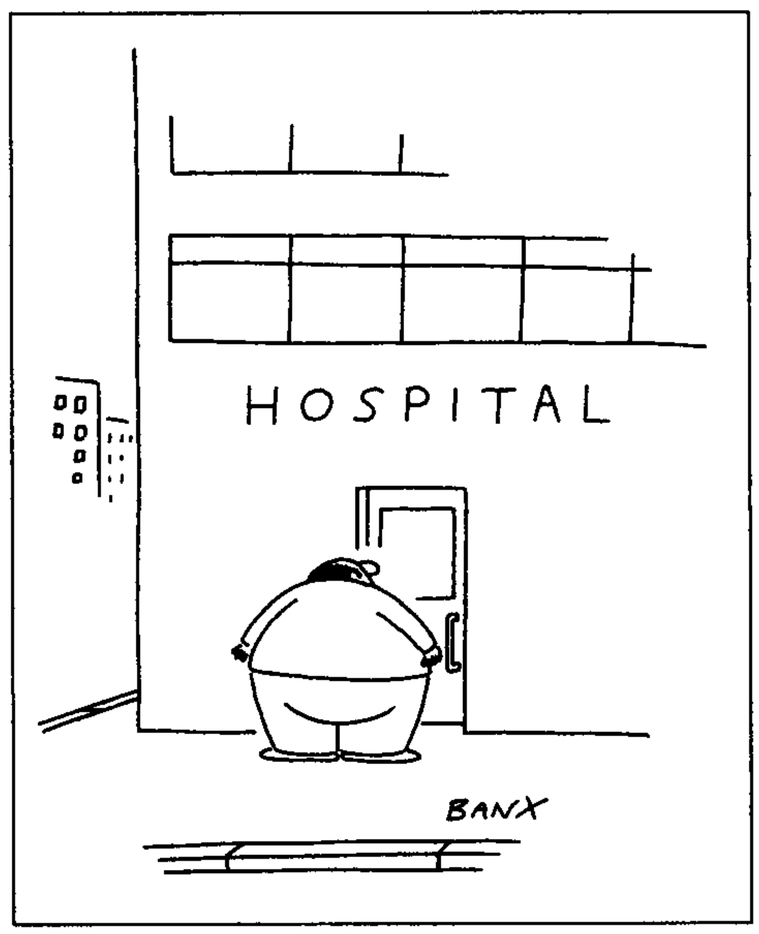
This policy has the further attraction of enabling the government to hit the target it announced in the 2000 NHS plan of 100 new hospitals by 2010, as a relatively small treatment centre (even an independent one) will count just as much as an "awfully grand monument".

Bodge the builder

AUSTRALIAN construction company Multiplex has already demonstrated its expertise in Britain by losing a fortune while building the new Wembley stadium. (The *hand-over has already been put* back from 31 January to 31 March, leaving precious little time for essential safety checks before the FA Cup final on 13 May.) Its record in the health arena has been no more impressive.

Back in March it brought about the collapse of the long-awaited refurbishment of Derriford hospital when it and another bidder withdrew from the project late on, putting back the much needed work by years. At the time Multiplex needed its cash to buy the Chelsfield property group, a lucrative deal that must have given great comfort to the people of Plymouth waiting for a decent hospital.

Despite this let-down, a few weeks later the company was selected to build and run four new hospital buildings in Peterborough under a £340m PFI contract. Locals shouldn't perhaps get their hopes up for a quick build.



Oxford blues

A PRIMARY care trust (PCT) in Oxfordshire has been advertising eye surgery over the radio in an attempt to shift unused private operations it has been forced to buy under Labour's brilliant health service "reforms".

Even though the John Radcliffe hospital offers perfectly good eye surgery, the PCT in south-west Oxfordshire has been obliged, like other PCTs, to sign a contract with the South African firm Netcare. This contract is so daft that the PCT even has to pay for work Netcare hasn't done – while across Oxfordshire the NHS is having to make cuts of £18m to cover its debts.

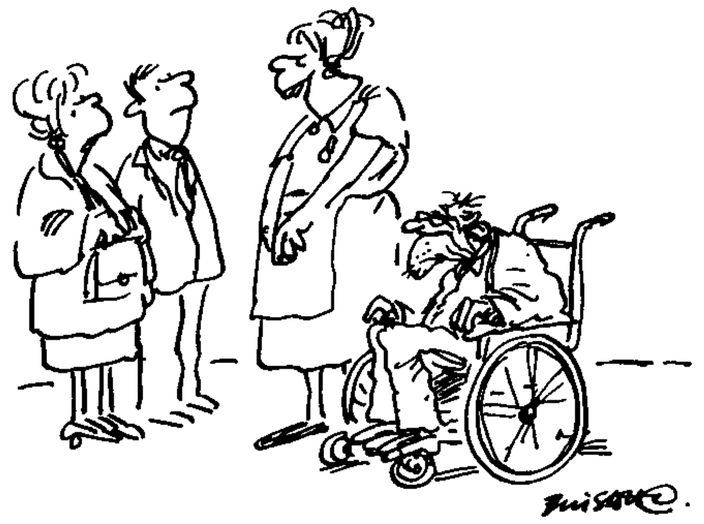
Local district councillor Andrew Crawford examined the Netcare figures in detail and discovered that in the first six months of the contract the PCT had paid out £255,000 for £40,000 of work and that the company had charged for around 500 operations and assessments when only 93 were carried out. At this rate, over the four-year life of the contract, the PCT will pay more than £1.5m for phantom operations.

Crawford put the figures to the PCT board at a meeting last month and the board did not disagree with them. Instead, it said it hoped more patients would opt for operations in Netcare's mobile vans. To this end, it has launched a marketing drive. Board papers state: "The uptake of slots for Netcare has been slow. Various marketing strategies have been employed... These have included advertising on the local radio stations, open days/evenings for patients and patient groups, talks and presentations to local groups, presentations and open evenings to GPs and ophthalmologists."

Last year the PCT board resisted pressure from the then Health Secretary John Reid to accept the Netcare deal. The trust's chairman and other board members resigned amid allegations of "bullying" by ministers who were determined to force the deal through.

Only one board member who voted against the Netcare contract, Mr Paul Wesson, remains in place. Just as the incredibly poor value of the contract has been revealed, the NHS appointments commission has written to Mr Wesson telling him it has started "the formal process for removing you from office", adding that "if you prefer you may submit a letter of resignation". The *Eye* asked the commission if its move against Mr Wesson was down to his opposition to crass Netcare deal. Reply came there none.

In north Oxfordshire, meanwhile, Cherwell Valley PCT is also struggling with Netcare and paying for non-existent operations. Cherwell was at least able to sell some cataract procedures on to Kent and Medway – but at a £50,000 loss.



"Tell me, does your father have any special dietary requirements we can ignore as soon as you're off the premises?"

Bones of contention

SEVENTY NHS patients had to be returned to the operating theatre after having orthopaedic ops at treatment centres run by private firm Partnership Health in the Trent and South Yorkshire area, according to a preliminary audit of how well "independent sector treatment centres" are working.

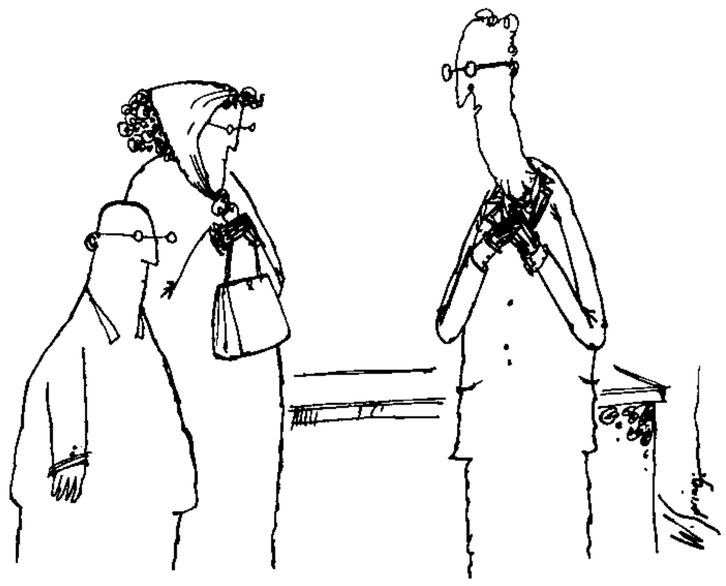
The report, by the National Centre for Health Outcomes Development (NCHOD) at Oxford University, measured success of five providers against a number of "key performance indicators" (KPIs).

Any patient having to be returned to the operating theatre is significant, with each case being described as a "sentinel event" and triggering a local investigation into what went wrong. In 15 months, 70 patients of Partnership Health had to go back into theatre – more than 2 percent of all the 3,253 patients treated. The report's authors sympathetically noted that "without consideration of the case-mix" it was difficult to judge how much of a failure that figure represented, but the other treatment centres all returned fewer than 0.4 percent of patients to theatre, with one centre meeting the "threshold" (aka target) of no returns.

Partnership Health told the *Eye* that that zero threshold for the KPI on returns to theatre – which is incorporated in its contract – is "totally unrealistic in any surgical unit" and that the percentage taken back for "serious incidents" was extremely low.

Still, you might think the figures would cause some concern at the Department of Health. But not so – Lord Warner described the report as "heartening", saying the independent sector treatment centres had "made a good start, not just on providing high quality services to NHS patients, but also on having a robust and comprehensive quality assurance and reporting system." Having a robust reporting system is all very well, but are ministers even looking at what the fine print of the reporting is telling them?

Meanwhile Partnership Health's parent company, Care UK, is doing very nicely thank you, last month reporting that (ahem) "operating profits" were up 20 percent to more than £18.8m following a "year of excellent progress".



"Hmm, if I may, Mrs Hamilton, before we discuss assisted suicide, I do feel I should at least examine your husband"

EYE TV

The Queen's Sister (C4)
Whatever Love Means (ITV1)

IN the television archives from the 1980s, there is a moment when Sir Alistair Burnett reaches the climax of his interview with the Queen Mother: "And is there, ma'am, anything else you wanted to say about your garden?"

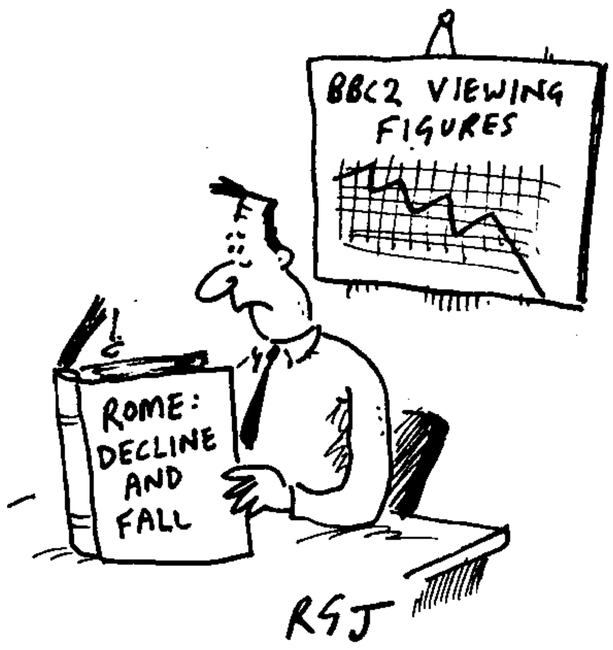
Such deference is unimaginable today, but the newly democratic attitude towards the royals comes out in drama, which may be a tactical mistake from the monarch's handlers because, as living or recently-dead figures, they get done over in the most treacherous and least-controllable genre of television fiction: drama-doc. Channel 4's play about Princess Margaret, **The Queen's Sister**, coincides with ITV1's dramatisation of the Charles-Diana-Camilla triangle, **Whatever Love Means**.

Note that neither of these pieces comes from the BBC – which would still be too nervy to have actors playing living royals – but British television has still come a hell of a long way since a knighted newscaster was bowling royals full tosses about their hollyhocks.

The only good thing for the royals is that, while drama-doc is embarrassing and intrusive, it isn't necessarily damaging because any evidence of ridiculous exaggeration for dramatic impact reduces the impact of the rest of the programme. Both of these shows are good examples of drama-docs' tendency to undermine their own authority by going too far.

The one on Margot, for example, sells the pass before a word has even been said. The captions stuck up before actuality dramas ("Certain scenes and characters have been invented" etc) usually involve weeks of negotiation between producers and lawyers; but Channel 4's one before *The Queen's Sister* just takes the piss: "Some of what follows is based on fact. And some isn't."

This frees them to do anything they want. Drinking in a Cockney pub with Tony Armstrong-Jones to prove she's not a stuck-up snob, Margaret gets into a bitch-fight and ends up trying to throttle a drinker with her scarf. When Margaret kisses a woman at a party, terrified Palace flunkeys take to the



nation's airwaves to deny that she's having a lesbian affair.

While it's possible that Margot may have tried to show Tony her prole side when they were courting – and there was gossip once about a Sapphic grab – it can be stated without equivocation that neither of the scenes described above ever actually happened. If, in the 1960s, a British broadcaster had even hinted that the Queen's sister did it with girls, the transmitters would have been switched off and executives jailed. What dramatic justification can there possibly be for the absolute falsification of social history?

There's also an infuriating device in which we suddenly see "ordinary people" sitting at home on their sofas, while captions flash up such as: "we don't care" or "we love you, Margaret". This may be another way of emphasizing that the whole thing is a fantasy but what's the point of a drama about real events in which the only reality is in the names of the participants?

ITV1's Chuck-Cam-and-Di film contains less risible invention, presumably because of a residual fear of dealing with the heir to the throne and a terror of upsetting the Di-lovers who are a vital part of ITV1's demographic.

Even so, the script has Princess Anne telling Charles that, if he doesn't much fancy Diana, he'll just have to "lie back and think of England". Whatever Love Means is made by Granada which pioneered the drama-doc and where Denis Forman and Leslie Woodhead insisted on the rule of two sources for every line of dialogue. That remark by "Princess Anne" exposes the new rule: no sources at all.

The characterisation is pretty much what you'd expect. Richard Johnson's Mountbatten is an old sea-dog with a vulgar tongue, wondering what Diana's like as a shag. Camilla is horsey, earthy and scheming, her dialogue largely consisting of puns on the word "ride". Charles is a self-pitying ditherer who is taught about sex by Camilla, although at least the heir to the throne, unlike David Blunkett in the recent *A Very Social Secretary*, doesn't have to endure his sexual technique being satirically dramatised.

Many commentators have noticed that both shows duck out of dramatising the Queen, which suggests a surviving tact in these matters, although these writers presumably didn't know that Channel 4 is currently making *The Queen*, in which Helen Mirren plays Liz 2 in the week after the death of Diana. The one consolation for monarchists – and frustration for Republicans – is that, in preferring cheek to research, these drama-docs actually tell us as little about what the royals are really like as those films in which a television sir crept round the Queen Mother's garden.

'Remote Controller'

MEDIA NEWS

THE BBC's campaign to increase the licence fee by 2.3 percent above the rate of inflation is not helped by yet more layers of secrecy created by the corporation's deals with private sector companies.

A document released by the BBC Board of Governors reveals that the Beeb has had to pay Land Securities Trillium a whopping £16.2m to end its disastrous contract to manage BBC properties (that's a full quarter of Radio Four's entire budget).

But the same document goes on to warn that "the need to carefully manage messages to the external media and also back to BBC business units is paramount" – meaning that we are unlikely to hear much about the deal made with LST's successor.

We don't even know exactly how much a move to Manchester might cost now that it might involve sharing a site with Microsoft. The BBC estimates £400m, "although that figure could still rise".

And the estimate of a further £5.5bn needed to fund digital switchover does not include a further £500m needed for what the BBC calls "switchover costs". What is certain is that without a hefty hike in the licence fee, programme makers are going to suffer another cull to pay for disastrous property deals and a switchover stitch-up courtesy of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

THE BBC's use of expensive helicopters to grab pointless aerial shots *(Eyes passim)* is under fire from the corporation's own health and safety wallahs.

Over the last two years BBC crews have been involved in "three serious helicopter accidents" involving "a loss of Tail Rotor Effectiveness", a lethal loss of control caused by the "low and slow" flight necessary for a camera operator to be able to get pictures.

"Do not, in any circumstances, place any undue pressure on a pilot in relation to getting better pictures," is the advice.

This is bad news for fans of the recent footage of ducks, geese and Blunkett's dog, but good news for licence-payers who pay the £1,000 per hour bills.

ONE year on from BBC Director-General Mark Thompson's pledge to "reconnect and embed the BBC in communities all over the UK", another victory for his campaign.

The BBC's chief technology officer John Varney announced last week that the corporation's research and development department was to leave Kingswood Warren, its Surrey home for more than half a century. With no sign of the mooted move to Manchester happening any time soon, those of its staff who are not offered redundancy will be rehoused along with most of the rest of the BBC in London's White City, because "it is essential that they move closer to producers and commissioners".

I'M A CELEBRITY GET ME OUT OF HERE!
IT'S BACK!...
WHERE ONCE AGAIN CELEBRITIES WITH NO OBVIOUS TALENT...
...TRY DESPERATELY...
...TO KEEP THEIR CAREERS AFLOAT
...BY PRESENTING IT
Ken Pyne

ROSIE BOYCOTT recently appeared on BBC TV's local London news, debating with a drinks industry spokesman about the wisdom of all day boozing.

Surprisingly for one with hitherto liberal views on cannabis and alcohol she came down firmly against the new licensing rules. "The hospitals will be full up [with drunks]," she complained. As indeed one hospital in the West Country was two years ago when a completely pissed driver narrowly missed a pensioner on the A303 and ploughed head-on into a tree, causing the road to be closed for five hours and an air ambulance being called to cut her out of the car. The name of the driver? Rosie Boycott.

DUMB BRITAIN

The Weakest Link, BBC2

Anne Robinson: The Grapple in the Apple, recently held in New York, was a debate between the journalist Christopher Hitchens and the politician George who?

Contestant: George Washington.

AR: In which film did Harry Lime say, "In Switzerland they had brotherly love and they had 500 years of democracy and peace. And what did they produce? The cuckoo clock!"?

Matthew Hoggard: One Flew Over The Cuckoo Clock.

AR: According to the popular singer Katie Melua in one of her recent songs, there are how many bicycles in Beijing?

Contestant: Ten?

AR: Nine million.

National Lottery Jet Set

Eamonn Holmes: King Robert I of Scotland was popularly known by what other name?

Contestant: Bob.

Number crunchings

3.7m ■ Viewers lost from *Lost* since it began on Channel 4

3.7m ■ Decline and fall in *Rome*'s audience since it began on BBC2

FOGHORN-voiced hack John Sweeney has taken up the case of Ian and Angela Gay, who were jailed earlier this year for killing their adopted son by force-feeding him salt. Following his *File on Four* programnme questioning the conviction, he also made a film for *Newsnight* last week in which viewers were treated to the spectacle of Sweeney vomiting after drinking a glass of heavily-salted water.

He originally offered the story to *Panorama*, only to be rebuffed by editor Mike Robinson. If the Gay case becomes a *cause célèbre*, as seems increasingly likely, this will mark an impressive double for Robinson. Four years ago Sweeney proposed a *Panorama* film about Sally Clark, who was convicted of killing her two sons on the "expert" evidence of paediatrician Sir Roy Meadow. Robinson refused, declaring that "it's not a story". Sweeney then reported the non-story for *File on Four*, leading to the release of Sally Clark and the striking-off of Meadow.

After five years at the helm of *Panorama*, some BBC hacks feel it may be time for Robinson to move on to a job more suited to his talents – such as, one suggests, "heading up Radio Hereford's sports desk".

AS PARENTS rudely awakened from their Saturday morning lie-in by their confused children will be aware, the BBC decided to shift last week's edition of *Dick and Dom in Da Bungalow* to BBC2 in favour of a live-link up with News 24 which was showing coverage of George Best's funeral – or rather, of people standing about in the rain, because nothing was actually due to happen for a further two hours.

This was in fact a straight swap, since BBC2 carries an hour of News 24 coverage between 9 and 10 every Saturday morning, pulling in a regular audience of around one million viewers. The corporation insisted that the decision had been taken because of the "nationwide interest" in Best's death – but obviously thought it wasn't quite strong enough to make them switch over to BBC2 to watch Dermot Murnaghan fill in time in a black tie.

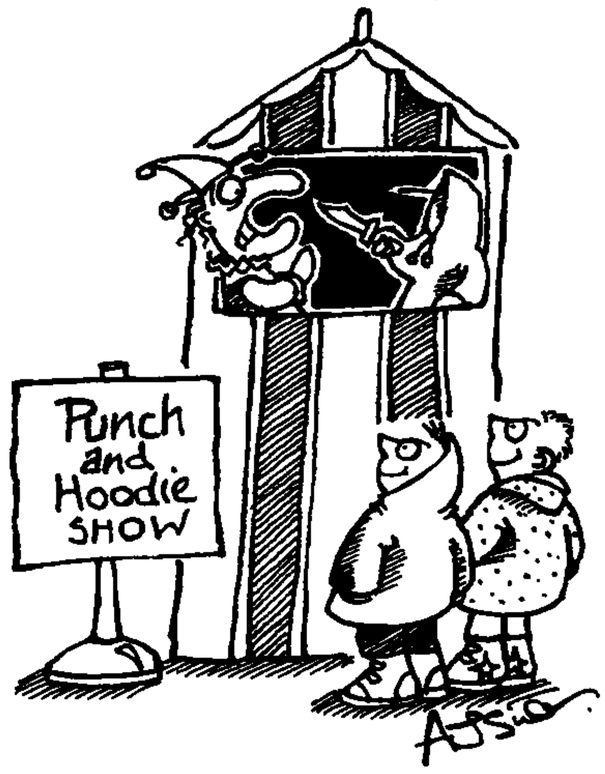
"Sky+ is leading edge technology and occasionally, as in this circumstance, leading edge technology can suffer from minor glitches but we are confident that this temporary issue will be resolved very shortly and in the meantime we truly appreciate your patience and apologise for any inconvenience."

Says who? James Murdoch, when emailed directly last month by Sky+ customers furious that the live TV pause/rewind function so vaunted in the company's advertising has, er, not worked properly on their systems since September.

The problems – which affect some but not all Sky+ boxes – arrived with the last software update which was rolled out across the system during August and September. These periodic updates arrive through the phone line which Sky customers are contractually obliged to leave plugged into their machine at all times, and September's update of parental control software brought with it a glitch which meant that on some occasions the pause button, rather than halting live TV for toilet breaks or so that it could be rewound and watched again, crashed the entire system.

The customer services department's initial response was to insist to anyone that called that this was an isolated problem with their individual box and offer to send an engineer out: fine if their system was still in warranty but a £65 charge if not. Eventually in mid-September, with customer service advisers conceding that they had received "hundreds, maybe thousands of calls" on the matter, Sky admitted that the problem was with the software, and that while it was working on a solution, it had no idea when this would be ready. In the meantime, if the live pause failed to work, the best thing to do was to unplug the box from the mains, wait for a while, and then switch it back on, which rather negates the point of pausing the telly so as not to miss anything. The problem is still ongoing – though a Sky spokesman assured the *Eye* that "we hope to resolve the problem in the near future."

Needless to say, the company's TV slots – which use a scene from martial arts epic The House of Flying Daggers to demonstrate that "you can pause and rewind live TV with Sky+ so you don't miss a trick" have continued to run throughout.



Number crunchings

138 ■ Number of premier league matches currently screened by Sky in "unacceptable" monopoly

23 ■ Number of premier league matches likely to be screened anywhere other than Sky thanks to new "fair" European Commission deal

0 ■ Number of those matches which are guaranteed to be free to view on TV

SUPERMODELS

KERBER

AAAH···· LOOK AT ALL THE WHITE POWDERY STUFF ON THE WINDOW
CAROLS
CAROLS
YEAH···· MAYBE SHE SHOULD'VE CLEANED UP THE HOUSE A BIT BEFORE CHRISTMAS!
CHEZ KATE MOSS
CAROLS
CAROLS

DOING THE ROUNDS

Flu jibes

WHO is really to blame for the shortage of flu jabs this year? Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt was keen to finger GPs for failing to order enough stock, when most ordered more than usual. She then tried blaming GPs again, for jabbing the "worried well", rather than those most clinically at need.

But "new" Labour has created a consumerist NHS where patients are encouraged to assert themselves to get the treatment they deserve. Given that politicians and civil servants are offered flu jabs, whether clinically indicated or not, Hewitt can hardly complain if fit patients ask for one too.

True, some patients are unduly worried, largely because the Department of Health declared that although the seasonal flu jab offers no protection against bird flu, there was a theoretical risk that the two could mix with catastrophic results. Most GPs have resisted giving NHS jabs to those outside the "clinically indicated" group, not least because they don't receive a fee for doing so.

However, many patients have bought their jabs privately, thus depleting the stock for those NHS patients who need it most. And who advised the "worried well" to go private? Step forward NHS Direct, "new" Labour's attempt at round the clock health advice, which on 21 November told patients on its website: "You may be able to pay for the jab, if your GP has stocks available."

Surprisingly, this suggestion has now been removed. But is it worth paying for a private flu jab? Not according to a recent review of all the published evidence which found that "the effectiveness of trivalent inactivated influenza vaccines in elderly individuals is modest, irrespective of setting, outcome, population, and study design."* For the elderly in the community, "the vaccines are apparently ineffective in the prevention of influenza, influenza-like illness, pneumonia, hospital admissions, or deaths from any respiratory disease". They do, paradoxically, seem to prevent some hospital admissions for influenza and pneumonia and reduce deaths from all causes, but as the researchers point out, this may be a sampling bias.

What's needed is large randomised controlled trials to see if they really work; but given the global push to vaccinate everyone, and make huge profits for the drug industry, these trials are extremely unlikely to occur. According to the *Lancet* review, the only people who clearly benefit from flu vaccination are residents of care homes, precisely the people who have been edged out in the mad Labour-induced jab frenzy.

* *Efficacy and effectiveness of influenza vaccines in elderly people: a systematic review.* Lancet 2005; **366**:1165-1174

"NEW" Labour's efforts to curb the spread of sexually transmitted infections are failing, according to the 2004 figures from sexual health clinics. Rates of HIV, chlamydia and drug-resistant gonorrhoea continue to rise among those lucky enough to get treatment, while the waiting list for "urgent walk in" appointments is up to 11 weeks in some centres.

This long-standing bottle neck was supposed to be eased in part by the extra £300m that the government gave to primary care trusts (PCTs), supposedly ring fenced for sexual health. However, at least half of this money has failed to reach the frontline, with PCTs preferring to pay off their debts safe in the knowledge that patients with sexually transmitted infections rarely go public about the outrageous waiting times they have to endure.

M.D.

off your trolley REEVE & WAY

THE NHS IS ONE BIG FAMILY, REALLY...
AND CHRISTMAS IS A TIME FOR BEHAVING LIKE FAMILIES...
UNFORTUNATELY
TYPICAL BEAN COUNTING ADMIN CRAP!
RUBBISH!
ARROGANT DOCTOR!
SLAPPER NURSE!
THAT WAS MY INTERESTING TEST CASE
I SAW HIS SYMPTOMS FIRST!

SIGNAL FAILURES

Conjuring with congestion

GROWING road congestion is a potential banana skin for the Department of Transport and its new policy of slashing rail services in English regions. But officials have a cunning plan: ignore it.

After their farcical pretence that an "express coach" can link Wolverhampton to Walsall faster than a non-stop train with exclusive right of way (*Eye* 1139), officials are plotting to close stations in the north-east and axe all trains between Sunderland and Newcastle. Their excuse is that local trains aren't "competitive against car", as the region has a "largely congestion-free highway network".

Whoops! Two days after the *Newcastle Journal* reported this, Transport Secretary Alistair Darling announced at the CBI conference road-pricing pilots in Tyne & Wear and Durham to… tackle road congestion. "One of the biggest threats to economic expansion we face in the next 10 to 15 years is congestion on the roads in our towns and cities," he said. The CBI responded that road pricing should be integrated with policies on public transport.

Actually Darling's contradictory policies on road and rail *are* connected – by his determination to avoid spending big money on regional transport, as demonstrated by his scuppering last week of tram schemes in Liverpool and Portsmouth. But switching people from trains to cars won't save much cash, if any. Truncating Middlesbrough to Newcastle services at Sunderland will reduce operating costs slightly, but the tracks must still be maintained for Metro services; the tiny cost reduction could be outweighed by lost revenue as people stop taking the train to Newcastle from towns like Hartlepool.

Officials would have us believe the lost revenue would be insignificant as train can't compete with car. Oh yeah? Hartlepool to Newcastle takes 58 minutes by car, according to the AA's route planner. That's in "average off-peak driving conditions" – ie ignoring the congestion Darling says is threatening our towns and cities. The train takes 49 minutes. A Hartlepool-Newcastle return train ticket costs £6, or £6.60 at peak times. At the Inland Revenue's approved mileage rate, the same round trip by car costs £25.60. The AA's estimated running costs (excluding standing charges like car tax and insurance) show the car journey would cost about £14. Parking in Newcastle's big NCP multi-storey costs £1.90 an hour.

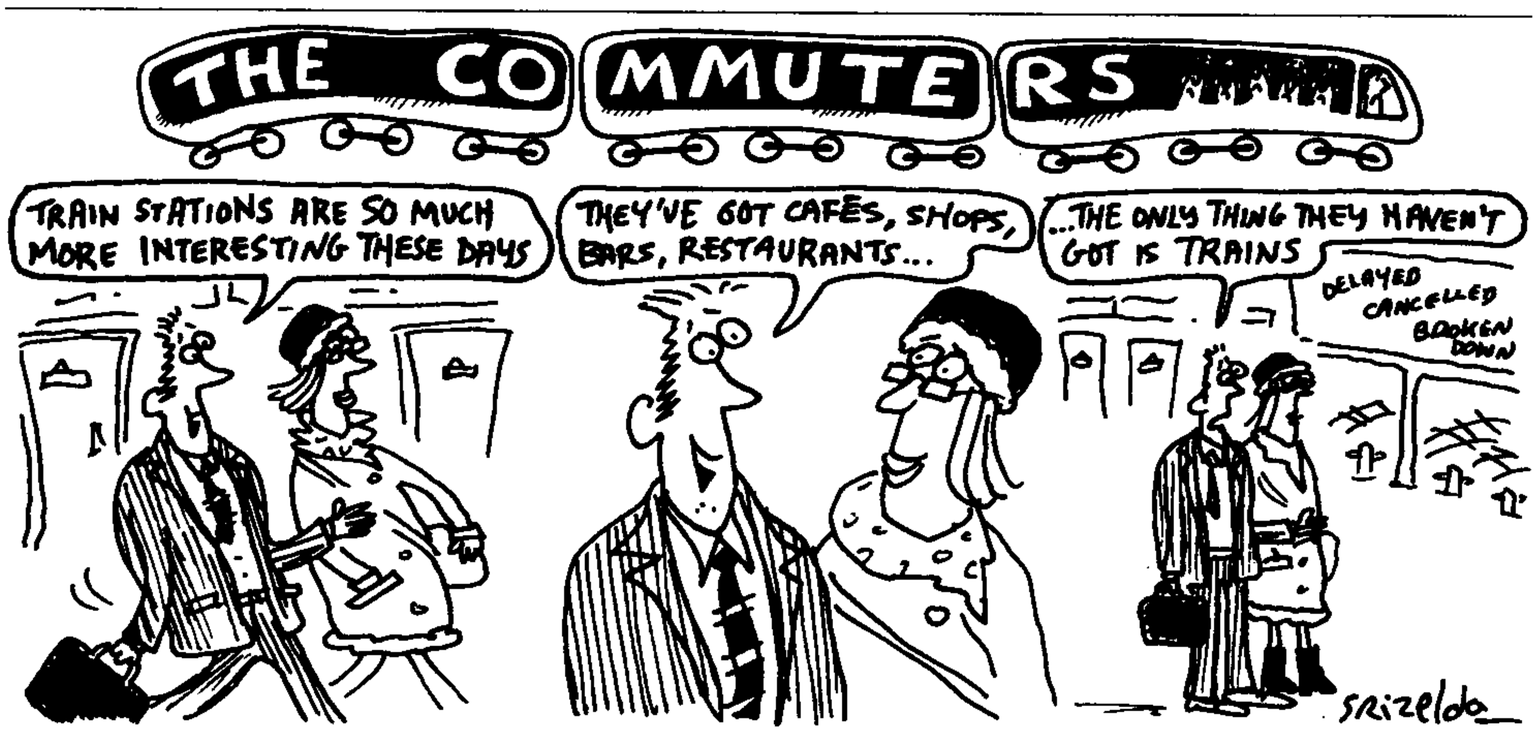
Despite rail's advantages, many people choose the car for journeys like this because for decades governments have encouraged car use through planning policies, new roads and other measures. Labour is doing its best to make rail uncompetitive with car: since 1997 train fares have risen 7 percent in real terms and motoring costs have fallen 6 percent. Privatisation inflated the cost of providing local trains in northern England by up to 375 percent (*Eye* 1101), so fares are higher and trains less frequent than they should be; but Labour has spurned chances to cut the pointless cost burden of privatisation. It had the opportunity to return northern England's rail services to state ownership at no cost last year, but instead went to the expense of organising a vast new Northern Rail franchise.

THE government evidently believes the French state will make a better fist of Kent's trains than the British state could, but how can it know?

Last week the Govia joint venture, which includes a subsidiary of French state rail (SNCF), won the new Kent franchise. Last year's Labour conference had voted to keep the operation in (British) state hands (it's been run by state-owned South Eastern Trains since French firm Connex was expelled in 2003). Instead ministers launched a costly franchise competition open to everyone except South Eastern Trains, which ensured they had no way of telling if the best bid was better value than sticking with SET. Clearly they haven't learned from the financial and operational mess created when the Tories let the first rail franchises – and banned British Rail from bidding.

PS: The other member of Govia is bus firm Go Ahead, whose chief executive Chris Moyes apparently understands why rail franchising is daft. In March he said it was unfair to compare SET (where punctuality rapidly improved after Connex left) with rail franchises as SET wasn't constrained by a franchise agreement. Now Govia will run Kent's trains for 10 years to a prescription fixed in 2005, where SET was freer to respond to changing times. Moyes won't mind, though: the new franchise agreement doesn't constrain executive pay, so there'll be chances aplenty to better the measly £681,000 he took home last year.

'Dr B. Ching'



■ROTTEN BOROUGHS■

REGENERATION GAME

BACK in 2001 Doncaster Mayor Martin Winter told the *Eye* that he wouldn't waste time talking to us because "my energies are used more productively leading Doncaster council on an extremely demanding regeneration agenda".

Central to that agenda were his plans for the so-called Glass Park project, which aimed to transform the site of a former Pilkington glass factory in the town into a "community" organic farm, enterprise centre, craft workshops, café, composting scheme, riding stables, garden, microbrewery and, er, fish farm.

In March 2002, we wrote: "So far... the transformation is all in Cllr Winter's head. The site currently consists of a stagnant pond full of old tyres and milk crates next to the factory's former dump, where shards of glass poke through the thin soil and weeds struggle to grow in the contaminated ground" (*Eye* 1049).

Nearly four years on, that's exactly how the Glass Park still is. The only difference is that even more British and European taxpayers' money has been swallowed up -- around £2m so far in regeneration grants and "106 monies", the proceeds of (legal) bungs to the council from developers.

In June this year the district auditor issued a review of the Glass Park projects which was promptly sat upon by Donny council's manager, Susan Law. Happily a copy has now found its way to the *Eye*.

The report, couched in the considered language of the DA, is a sorry tale of mismanagement, misinformation and possible fraud. One scandal concerns so-called "matching funds", in which a Glass Park subsidiary would claim that funding had been obtained or guaranteed, thereby receiving considerable "matching" funding from various departments of Doncaster council. No questions were ever asked as to the existence of these "matching funds", which the auditor discovered usually not to have existed. No steps were taken by the council to recover money misplaced as a result of such misrepresentations.

Projects were "promulgated to meet the needs of the local community", but much of the supporting evidence *didn't stand up. The* council, noted the DA, had no mechanism to check if claims were fraudulent.

The audit found that at the end of many grant funded projects "significant" items of equipment such as a digital camera [cost £2,857] and IT equipment [a printer costing £2,500] were left in the possession of employees. A whole range of expensive electrical products vanished.

The auditor also complains that the schemes were generally not in compliance with Inland Revenue requirements on the payment of tax and NI, that administration costs were excessive, taking up to 67 percent of grant aid received, and that there was weakness in the registration of members' interests in council-funded schemes.

The original Glass Park Development Company was registered with Companies House in the name of Martin Jon Winter [company secretary] and Elisabeth Jeffress [director], Winter's fellow councillor. Winter was succeeded as secretary by his wife, Carolyne Hunter. Neither is currently on the board, but both still take a close interest in Glass Park affairs, so dedicated are they to the "regeneration" of Doncaster.

NICE WORK

LAMBETH'S ruling Lib-Dem-Tory coalition has come up with a bizarre face-saving deal for Cllr Keith Fitchett, Lib Dem "executive member" for housing, under whose watch a conman was able earlier this year to relieve the council of nearly £3m.

Eye 1144 told how the fraudster got himself a job in the housing dept with responsibility for purchasing central heating systems for council flats. He requested 28 separate payments, each for £100,000, to a company he had set up himself. No central heating equipment was ever delivered, but no one thought to ask why not, nor where the money was going.

Following Labour opposition calls for Fitchett's head, he has been stripped of his powers, which have been transferred to a newly created "executive working group" for housing. The group, chaired by Tory Cllr Bernard Gentry, will deal with all housing matters in the borough, including the investigation into the fraud.

Fitchett, however, has refused to resign, or to give up the £15,000 special allowance that comes with the job he is no longer doing, so the council is letting him keep it. Isn't life (fifteen) grand?

● **SOMEONE had to take a stand against Britain's Christmas Killjoys (© *Dacretrash Newspapers 2005*). So paper hats off to the councillors of Wootton Bassett town council in Wiltshire, who defied protests and went ahead last Friday to open Santa's grotto... at a local funeral parlour. Santa parked his sleigh at Maslin's funeral directors because last year's venue, Bob the Bakers, has closed. Joy Fisher raised a 200-signature petition against the idea. She told the local *Gazette and Herald*: "The only time you go to a funeral directors is to arrange a funeral for a loved one or if you are dead... it is not a place of happiness." But deputy town clerk Wendy Marchment said: "This kind of petty and bigoted attitude will detract from what we are trying to achieve. We support the concept as it dispels the fears and myths of what it is like to enter a funeral directors." That's the spirit!**

SEAGULL DROPPINGS

NEWS that Lewes District Council in Sussex was to mount a legal challenge to John Prescott's decision to allow Brighton and Hove Albion to build a 22,000-seat football stadium on downland in a designated area of outstanding natural beauty provoked a hysterical reaction in Skidrow-on-Sea, where "the Seagulls" have been effectively homeless since the club flogged its previous ground to a property developer in 1997.

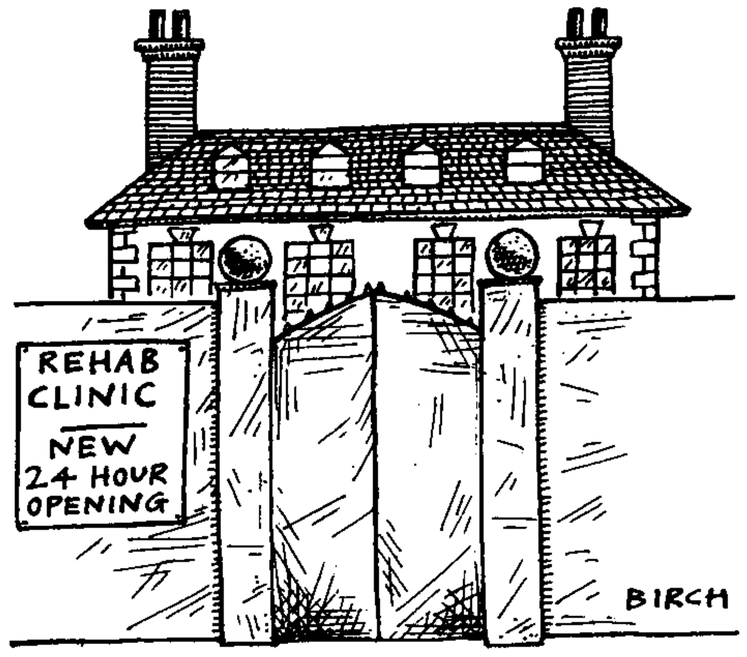
The Brighton *Argus* expressed the "outrage" of football fans, who of course don't give a damn where the stadium is built, as long as they get one somewhere. Skidrow's beleaguered Labour politicians, clinging to their seats on the council and in parliament, joined the populist clamour against neighbouring Lewes. The *Argus*'s front page pictured the nine members of Lewes DC's cabinet, under the headline "These Councillors Could Wreck Albion's Plans For Stadium" as if democracy and justice had been overturned by a bunch of football-hating nimbys. Lewes DC leader Anne De Vecchi has sought police advice after receiving threatening letters and emails from Albion's moronic fans.

In fact it was Two Jags' politically-motivated decision in October to allow the stadium on the site, on the boundary between Skidrow and Lewes (see *Eye* 1146) that was an affront to justice. Albion's plans, approved by Skidrow council, were rejected as unsuitable for the site by two planning inspectors after long and costly inquiries. To get around this Prescott said that although a football stadium in itself is not in the national interest, the "regeneration" of an area of deprivation such as Moulsecoomb, a nearby run-down estate at the edge of Brighton, is. Prescott has now set a dangerous precedent: any developer could in the future use this specious argument to build on any area of outstanding natural beauty, or even National Park, as long as there was a handy "area of deprivation" somewhere near.

Not only can a developer use the "deprivation" excuse to build on protected land, but the government will pay him to do so. Thus Skidrow United hopes to get £10m in grants to drive its bulldozers across the government's own countryside policy.

● **THE selection of Nicky Aiken as candidate for Westminster council's rock-solid Conservative Warwick ward has raised eyebrows within local Tory ranks. Disquiet has been caused by the fact that Ms Aiken, a former party spokesperson in Wales, happens to be married to Alex "chicken wrestler" Aiken (*Eyes passim*), the famously impartial head of Westminster council's communications department. No doubt Mr Aiken will handle any potential conflicts of interest with his usual tact and skill.**

★*THE Rotten Boroughs investigation into planning shenanigans on Alderney (*Eye *1145) aroused such interest that all copies of the Eye sold out within minutes of going on sale on the island. For the benefit of anyone who wasn't able to get a copy, the story has been posted on our website: www.private-eye.co.uk.*



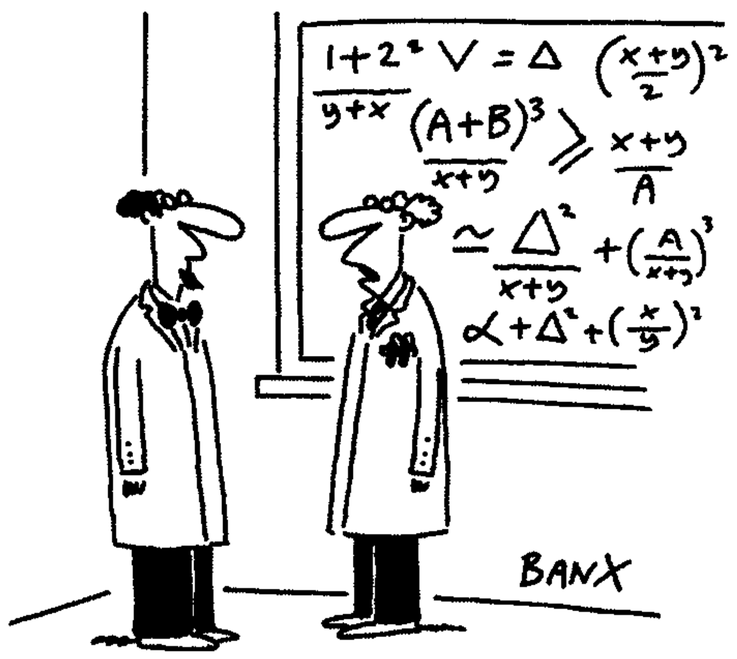
EDUCASHUN NEWZ

A £23m "improvement" scheme for special needs education in Wandsworth sounds like a generous investment, except that it's being paid for by... closing down even more special schools.

In his letter published in *Eye* 1145, Wandsworth councillor Malcolm Grimston was keen to emphasise all the refurbishment and expansion going on at the borough's remaining special schools, as an answer to criticism of the closure of Chartfield School in west Putney. What he didn't mention was that a large chunk of the cash for those projects is to come from the closure of The Vines school, for children with moderate learning difficulties, in Battersea.

The Vines was described by Ofsted as a good school with outstanding leadership and a "happy thriving community". In its place Wandsworth is to provide two specialist support teachers to visit and advise mainstream teachers with special needs pupils in their classes.

Wandsworth made the decision on the closure last month, despite the pleas of parents, governors and headteacher Lorraine Boyle that the 20 pupils who will be transferred into mainstream schools would not cope with lessons and would be at risk of being bullied – pointing out that many had arrived at The Vines only after having a horrible time failing to cope in mainstream. The remaining pupils will be moved to other special schools.



"I've invented a machine to go back in time and rescue physics in schools"

NOOKS and CORNERS

CHARMINSTER, a village just north of Dorchester in Dorset, is memorable for the magnificent Perpendicular Gothic west tower of St Mary's parish church. The nave is Norman; and although the chancel and the widened north aisle date from the 1830s, it is a building full of atmosphere and interest. But it is, of course, utterly inadequate for today's needs.

When the Rev Janet Smith arrived at Charminster she was "saddened to hear from two people who told me that they were no longer able to go to services because there was no loo in the church". How villagers managed to worship in their parish church for eight centuries without one passes comprehension; but now the "lack of a loo facility easily accessible for visitors coming to baptisms, weddings and funerals" had become simply intolerable.

St Mary's clearly needed bringing into the 21st century. The first step was obvious: out with the solid oak pews in nave and north aisle that were installed (possibly with the advice of Thomas Hardy) in the careful restoration of the 1890s. Then, the loo facility being the main objective, using the excuse of that licence for vandalism, the Disability Discrimination Act, plans were drawn up for a disabled chemical toilet by the diocesan architects, John Stark & Crickmay of Dorchester.

Straddling the space between the north aisle and choir vestry, this will cost £15,000. But this is, of course, just the beginning and the Rev Janet plans an extension to the church containing offices, a kitchen and lavatories (which will presumably make the in-house loo facility redundant) even though the Village Hall is close by.

Salisbury Diocesan Advisory Committee is minded to approve the plan for the new loo, but there is disquiet in the village about both the removal of the pews and about the current proposals. The vicar, however, is undaunted and has used the pulpit to denounce members of the congregation who object to the plans for the loo facility for obstructing "God's will". And so the Church of England slips further into introverted sectarian intolerance and fine church buildings – just so much "plant" – are needlessly spoiled.

WHAT is proposed for Charminster Church is, perhaps, trivial when compared to what Colchester Borough Council hopes to do to a great swathe of "Britain's oldest recorded town".

The dire down side of comprehensive redevelopment has long been evident, but it seems that news of this takes time to penetrate to Essex. To create the proposed Vineyard Gate shopping centre to be built by the Caddick Group, based in Yorkshire, the borough council is prepared to clear a large area next to the Roman wall next to St Botolph's Street. The whole of the western side of St Botolph's Street will go, as will the northern side of Osborne Street. None of the targeted buildings is listed but all are within the central conservation area – and the point is that the existing streets are varied and attractive mixtures of buildings of different dates, and which are all currently in viable commercial use. Indeed, 13 St Botolph's Street, a butcher's shop, turns out to be Colchester's oldest continuous business.

Many of the buildings in these streets are 19th century, and the Victorian Society has commented: "The buildings are solid and don't appear to have any structural problems, they are an integral part of the street scene." In response, the borough now talks of keeping some facades, but retained facades pinned on to a tawdry, characterless shopping centre merely look pathetic. The life and variety of the streets will go for no good reason.

Cllr Robert Davidson, the council's "cabinet member for regeneration and partnerships", retorts that "The Victorians themselves had little regard for past history. They put up buildings all over the place, destroying existing architecture." The first half of this statement is nonsense as, usually, the Victorians are accused of being too obsessed with the past; the second is irrelevant as while individual premises may have been rebuilt in the 19th century, they did not go in for comprehensive redevelopments to enable local authorities to make money at the expense of local businesses and interests.

The council plan to raze a large chunk of the historic town have elicited cries of "outrage" and "civic vandalism"; blinkered, self-defeating and stupid might be more pertinent criticisms.

BIRMINGHAM City Council is going to demolish the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, a decent building of 1958 which is in use. The architect was John Madin, who also designed the Central Library which the council would like to replace by an exciting masterpiece by the firm of Milord Rogers on another, less convenient site.

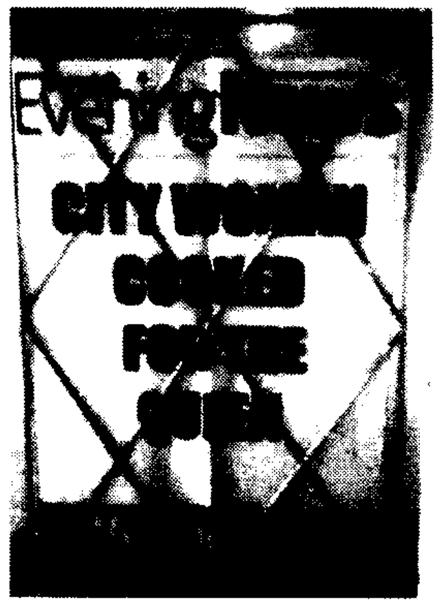
The Chamber of Commerce is to be replaced by new commercial offices, and, as it is not listed, so be it – except that it contains a superb abstract mosaic mural by John Piper, surely one of Britain's best 20th century artists. So the council is asking the developer to move the wretched artwork to an "appropriate location". It now turns out that, to be shifted, the mural will have to be chopped up and that the new location is an underpass where nobody will see it. Such is Birmingham's commitment to art and culture.

'Piloti'

YOUNG BRITISH ARTISTS

BY BIRCH

Making out we're promiscuous.
Serial shaggers.
At it like rabbits.
ARTISTS GET MORE SEX— IT'S OFFICIAL!
SCIENTIFIC SURVEY AT NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY



I-SPY

Chapelfield, Norwich

Submitted by John Kearney. £10 paid for similar submissions. *(SAE required for return of photographs)*

MUSIC & MUSICIANS

ENGLISH National Opera in crisis. Again. It's hardly news any more to relate the woes of ENO, and it was only a matter of time before the board decided that nice but weak Sean Doran didn't have what it took to run a faltering company. But the odds were stacked against him from the start.

When Doran was appointed in 2003 – barely 30 months ago – he had little experience of working in opera. In fact he knew nothing about it. He had no notion of how to proceed, beyond floating absurd ideas for Annie Lennox to sing *Pierrot Lunaire* and Steven Spielberg to direct *Moses und Aron*. And having arrived direct from the Perth Festival in Australia where he managed to lose nearly £1m in his first season, his financial credentials weren't pristine either.

Why ENO ever appointed him remains a mystery. And the best thing it can do now he's agreed to fall on his sword is reverse some of the bad decisions he's made in those 30 months. Not least the appointment of the unknown, unremarkable and uncommitted Oleg Caetani to be a part-time Music Director (in between his other jobs in Europe and Australia) as from next year. Caetani was as poor a choice for ENO as Doran himself; and if the engagement is allowed to go ahead, it will be the silliest mistake ENO has ever made (which is saying something) as well as the occasion for a lot more sword-falls.

But the broader lesson is that you can't take too much care in finding the right people to run opera companies. And it's a lesson they'll be pondering in Cardiff where Welsh National Opera is having problems finding a successor to its departing Chief Executive, Anthony Freud.

The job was advertised a month ago and there's no shortage of inappropriate names in the ring – including that of Bryn Terfel, who would be a glamorous figurehead on the twice a year he was able to show up for meetings. But one name fills the WNO staff with special dread: that of Dr John Evans, soon to be dinosaured as head of music programming at Radio 3 and desperately searching for somewhere else to go.

Aloof and prickly, with the coldest stare this side of Greenland, the Doctor (as he likes to be called) has not been a popular figure at Broadcasting House. And his fondness for management intrigue (together with an awful lot of trips abroad courtesy of his generous expense account) has not helped Radio 3 escape its current trough of misery under the ineffectual leadership of Roger Wright. Someone has to answer for the dreary, formulaic, ill-considered programmes that are losing audiences in droves; and though that someone should in justice have been Wright, the sacrifice of Dr Evans is seen by some as a consolation prize.

But what does he do now? He's apparently been looking in America and made an embarrassingly forceful attempt to get Clive Gillinson's job running the LSO, with no success. And now he's after WNO, reminding everybody that he is, after all, Welsh. Company members, meanwhile, are hoping that in true operatic fashion, someone more attractive will turn up to save the show before the curtain falls.

'Lunchtime O'Boulez'

Letters

Missing the target

Sir,

Janet Wright's email (Eye 1145) re: your piece about the runner-up Paul Foot Award given to Daniel Foggo and Charlotte Edwardes (Eye 1144) was wide of the mark by a light-year. There was nothing in your citation about "attacking" women who seek abortion at whatever stage. As I read the original article, the point was that Government (ie, taxpayers') money was funding what the same Government's laws made illegal. If Ms Wright disagrees with these laws, she should write to her MP (or the relevant Government department) – or become one herself and try to change them.

Whatever one's view of abortion, if Ms Wright thinks the exposure of Government hypocrisy and incitement to crime in high places an "unworthy cause" for journalists, then one wonders why she reads the Eye at all.

Yours sincerely,
THOMAS TALLON,

London SE3.

Noam comment

Sir,

Don't be silly. Chomsky had every right to complain about being misrepresented (Street of Shame, 1146). He is not responsible for Brockes' idiotic piece being removed – that was Ian Mayes' decision, correct in my view. Nevertheless, Chomsky's website still has the piece on it: http://www.chomsky.info/onchomsky/20051031.htm

RICHARD SEYMOUR,

Administrator (TOC Waterloo).

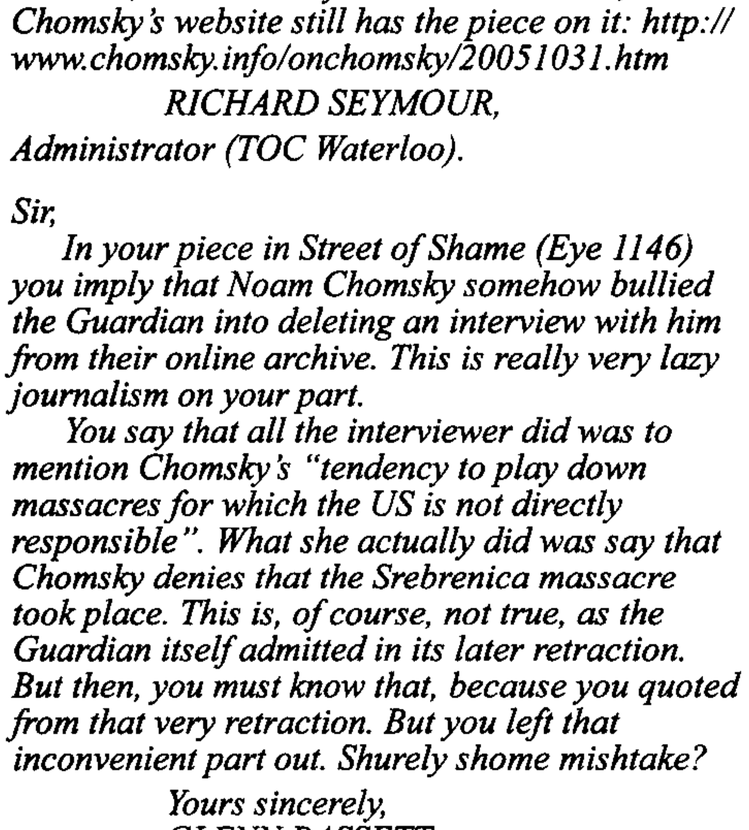
Sir,

In your piece in Street of Shame (Eye 1146) you imply that Noam Chomsky somehow bullied the Guardian into deleting an interview with him from their online archive. This is really very lazy journalism on your part.

You say that all the interviewer did was to mention Chomsky's "tendency to play down massacres for which the US is not directly responsible". What she actually did was say that Chomsky denies that the Srebrenica massacre took place. This is, of course, not true, as the Guardian itself admitted in its later retraction. But then, you must know that, because you quoted from that very retraction. But you left that inconvenient part out. Shurely shome mishtake?

Yours sincerely,
GLENN BASSETT,

Enfield, Middlesex.



The filth amendment

Sir,

Remote Controller criticises the BBC's Rome for its "succession of the most... erotic scenes possible". I can hardly agree. True the first episode was promising with a reasonable amount of filth, particularly at the start. Subsequent episodes have proved a bitter disappointment with a hopelessly anachronistic lack of sex. I am afraid that once again the thinking public have been short-changed by the cynical tactic of "front-loading" a series with a smidgeon of smut but failing to keep it up. Do they imagine that our depravity makes us fools? This shabby treachery must have Lord Reith spinning in his grave.

Yours faithfully,
RORY TODD,

Via email.

Sham on you

Sir,

I was hypnotised by Cllr Grimstone's very correct statement of laudable intentions (Letters, Eye 1145). What a shame it's a sham. Wandsworth has not "always been highly sceptical about the headlong rush to inclusion of youngsters with Special Educational Needs". Six years ago I remember the good Councillor at the forefront of a Council initiative to move Greenmead School, for children with severe physical, communication and learning difficulties, and amalgamate it with a mainstream primary school, Southmead School. It was a crazy idea, for many reasons not least of which was that on the tiny site of Southmead there wasn't nearly enough room to put in the necessary access. Some of us parents at Greenmead thought that the Council may have had its eye on the value of the site of Greenmead and another school, Chartfield, were the schools to have been moved or closed, that we put at over £10m sold for housing – a nice little earner for a Council strapped with low tax revenues. But no, we must have been wrong, for the main reason given by the Council (Consultation Paper, 1996) was this:

"In line with the Government's policy of promoting inclusion, and fostering links between children in special and mainstream schools, the Council has given close consideration as to how greater inclusion could be promoted for children on the roll of Greenmead School. It is the Council's view that this can best be achieved by co-location on the site of a mainstream school."

Yuk,
RUPERT MAAS,

Greenmead Action Group, 1999.

Season's bleatings

Sir,

Mucksprea der has exceeded even his usual high standards of verbal slurry with his highly selective account of the foot-and-mouth crisis. Having admitted that the disaster cost the taxpayer £3bn he goes on to imply that none of it was the farmers' fault and therefore we should all be prepared to stump up the cash again if there is another similar outbreak.

I seem to remember that the National Farmers Union itself opposed a vaccination programme at the time, on the grounds that it would remove Britain's FMD-free status or was the real reason that the farmers were doing jolly well from the compensation payments?

Baa humbug,
J. HEATH,

Ivybridge, Devon.

SUNDAY TELEGRAPH £1.40
Cashier Confirmed - Age Over 16
Sainsbury's, Tewkesbury

Scenes You Seldom See

"No more for me, Janice. I hate being seen drunk in public"

Campaigning SCOPE

Sir,

You make a valid point about the amount spent by SCOPE on salaries in its new incarnation as a "campaigning" organisation.

However, please bear in mind that SCOPE has seen its income fall drastically during this century, and was forced to begin closing services before it started advertising jobs with huge salaries.

SCOPE has had to change both to survive, and to continue the Herculean task of getting "disability issues" to be taken seriously. Whilst six-figure sums for a charity chief executive might seem excessive, it should be remembered that this is the nation's premier organisation for upholding the rights of people with cerebral palsy.

Without decades of work by SCOPE, services for people with cerebral palsy would be even thinner on the ground than they are today. Our charity was originally the Medway branch of the Spastics Society (SCOPE's original name), before becoming CPC and "going independent". There are many "offshoots" like us who owe their formation to SCOPE.

Yours sincerely,
RICHARD CHAMBERS,

Fundraising Department,
Cerebral Palsy Care.

Cutting remarks

Sir,

Re: Dumb Britain, Eye 1146. Whilst in written and "BBC" English the distinction between secateurs and secretaries is clear, the addition of an Ulster accent makes them rather more similar.

Add to that the less-than-perfect sound quality of a phone-in and I think you may be doing the contestant on the George Jones radio show something of an injustice.

Yours,
MIKE LONG,

Leicester.

Bastardisation of the language

Sir,

I noted the unsurprising findings of the Ofcom Report "Language and Sexual Imagery in Broadcasting: A Contextual Investigation" (Eye 1146). One "startling insight" reported was that "Bastard God: Profanity could be offensive, but no one has ever heard of this phrase". Ofcom researchers might spend a couple of days in Italy, where Dio Bastardo is frequently used (literal translation: Bastard God).

Yours faithfully,
JANE FIELD,

Co. Antrim.

Lookalike

Boy King

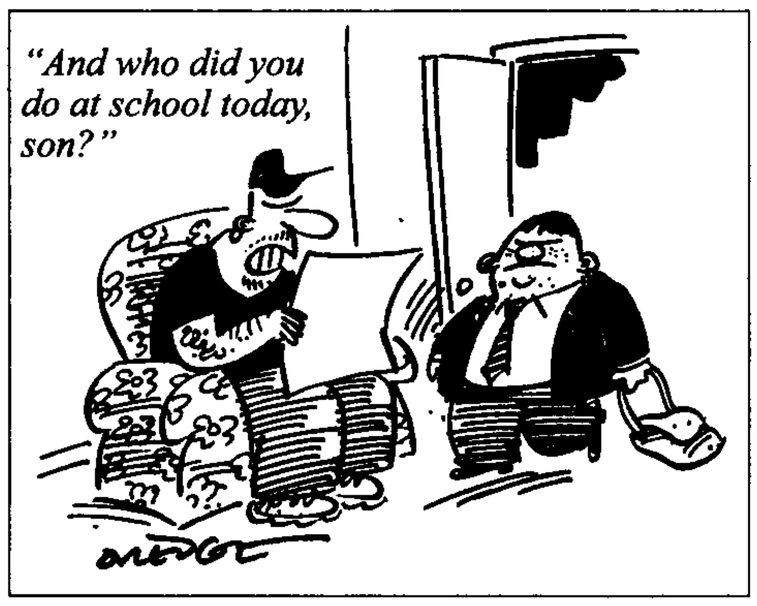
Bill Deedes

Sir,

I was struck by the resemblance between Mr W.F. Deedes and the "Boy King' Tutankhamen. Are the two related, and could this perhaps explain the beloved scribe's longevity?

Yours sincerely,
A.J. NORGATE,

Southsea, Hants.



Marquee these words

Sir,

Mr Clayton is being economical with the truth about the true facts of the mounting opposition to English Heritage's "regeneration" project for Chiswick. None of the opponents, whether they be the Georgian Group or the Ancient Monuments Society, or others, wants the status quo. But they condemn in the strongest language what they see as an ill-conceived scheme, and one conceived in secrecy for over a year. What Mr Clayton does not reveal is the confession on the part of English Heritage that what matters is the necessity that Chiswick must pay its way by corporate entertainment. Hence, the project has been divided into two phases. The Heritage Lottery Fund application is for phase one, and note that this includes the new restaurant, crucially positioned near the villa. Mr Clayton is silent that the success of this prostituting of one of our greatest buildings would lead to phase two, where a crass function building would be attached to the villa, and a huge marquee sited adjacent, so large in fact that if corporate junketing succeeded it would never be taken down. In Mr Clayton's own words, "We need the function to be two storeys so as to disguise the view from the villa of the marquee". This would be hilarious if it were not saddening. All of us in the opposite camp hope the Heritage Lottery Fund will see that both phases must be conceived holistically and that this demeaning project should be sent back to the drawing board.

JOHN HARRIS,

Via email.

Pease pudding

Sir,

What exactly is Ken Pease a Professor of? Not economics that's for sure. If he was he would understand what a vested interest was and that as a public body staffed by practitioners whose only interest is in the reduction of crime, the Probation Service was a very different beast to a private company (at an ethical level at least). The Professor may like to know that as a writer of reports for various courts I am trained to actively divert unsuitable "offenders" away from community orders and towards more commensurate sentences such as fines etc, especially for low risk and first time "offenders". A private company would be solely interested in profit and it would act and train accordingly.

There are many in the Probation Service who have watched in horror as privatisation, under the codename of "contestability", has become more and more of a certainty and I recently discovered that there are already companies being set up to take over (sorry, bid for...) the delivery of accredited groupwork programmes and no doubt they will be there to bid for the management of community orders like the highly successful Group4 (shome mishtake, shurley?). How can you lose when you back every horse in the race? The point is that a public Probation Service would see victory being the reduction of crime and not sky-high share prices.

Yours etc,
GARETH GREEN,

Probation Officer.

Jail bait

Sir,

On a further only slightly connected note your article about the Prison Service entry testing in Eye 1146 should also be challenged. Prisons are not very nice places to work in. Those who work there have to deal with some of the worst members of society with little or no thanks given for what they do. Indeed the general idea in the press seems to be that all prison officers and other staff are either corrupt thugs or naive do-gooders.

Having worked in a prison for a few years, no longer by the way, I know that this is generally not true. The unfortunate result, however, is that the Prison Service does have problems recruiting staff so if they did set the entry standards too high then they would have fewer people working for them than they do now.

Yours faithfully,
DAVID MARTIN,

Via email.

Brain cells

Sir,

The prison officers' aptitude test (Eye 1146) is not as risible as first appears, calling for open-mindedness and lateral thought.

With a record prison population of 78,000, a fully-occupied B Wing of 84 prisoners with two beds in a cell may have been true when the paper was set. By the time it is marked, however, governors will have had to squeeze in several more beds and a couple of store cupboards will have been re-designated as cells.

"Seven days' work at 80 pence a day" tests the candidates' capacity for abstract thinking. The workshops are shut since there aren't the staff to get the prisoners to them.

With almost 20,000 more prisoners than when Labour took power, it's a good job that people feel so much safer.

Yours faithfully,
PETER QUINN,

Former Prison Governor, N. Yorks

"Why exactly do you wish to return this hair straightener?

Elementary error

Sir,

Your "First Drafts" feature (Eye 1146), depicting Sir Arthur Conan Doyle conceiving the phrase "Elementary, my dear Watson" shows a lower than your usually excellent standard of research. All Sherlock Holmes fans will know that the above statement never actually appeared in any of Conan Doyle's stories, the corruption appeared later when Holmes's celebrity had increased.

Yours faithfully,
GEORGE E. BURR,

Elham, Canterbury.

TWELVE GRIM DAYS OF CHRISTMAS KNIFE & PACKER

LUVVIES

"When I was a child I wanted to be a butcher and a patissier so I could feed and care for others. Now, as an actor, I feed the inner soul."

GERARD DEPARDIEU
Independent

Submitted by Niall Duffy.

"When you are putting together a show, it's like being in wartime. There's a unity."

"I want you [her dancers] to inspire them [the audience] to be a better version of what they are already'."

MADONNA on bbc.co.uk

Submitted by Garnet Roach.

An occasional column devoted to gems from the acting profession. £10 paid for entries.

Own goal

Sir,

Never before have I come so close to cancelling my subscription as I did when I read in "Nooks and Corners" (Eye 1146) that "Brighton 'n' Hove Albion FC had sold its old stadium in 1997 to make a killing, despite not having anywhere permanent to go, which was a little foolish."

The club's old stadium was sold by its previous owner, DIY magnate Bill Archer, for reasons the supporters still don't fully know. The land was sold for £7m and then sold on one year later for a massive profit.

The plans were opposed by a village which happens to be the other side of a busy dual carriageway from the stadium site.

As for John Prescott having approved a "huge overweening structure", the public inquiry heard that it would be set tastefully alongside the natural landscape of the Downs, and not visible from much of Brighton and Hove's periphery. There will be hardly any traffic, because all supporters will have to arrive by coach or public transport. It'll make a significant regeneration of, and create jobs in, the deprived East Brighton area. And I suppose some people might call me an "attendant nuisance", but I've been attendant at matches since 1992 and I don't plan to stop.

It's lucky I find the other stuff in the mag funny, isn't it?

Yours etc,
CALLUM MAY,

Carlisle.

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome

Sir,

I'm glad to see someone like Dr Rob Johnson sticking up for Professor Roy Meadow, whose only fault it seems was to quote statistics (which everyone knows are always open to criticism): your correspondent Sean Connolly should acknowledge that the fact someone is acquitted on appeal because there was an error in their trial does not necessarily mean that they are not guilty.

The contention that SIDS could run in families due to a genetic defect originated in 1972 with Dr Alfred Steinschneider, who built a decades-long career on the premise, until twenty years later the mother of the five children he had used as the basis for his theory finally confessed that she had killed them all – as Steinschneider's nurses had continually tried to persuade him was the commonsense conclusion. (Anyone who's interested should read "The Death Of Innocents" by Firstman and Talan.)

The danger now is that authorities are loath to prosecute mothers suffering from post-natal depression who harm their children; even though the penalty would be psychiatric hospitalisation providing the help they need; due to the peril of compensation. At least one recently reported case, of a second death in the same family, was dismissed as misfortune, despite it being obvious to anyone with relevant experience that it was a clear-cut example of PND infanticide.

It should be accepted, however, that such mothers often do not have a clear memory of their actions and truly believe themselves to be innocent.

WENDY HARVIE,

London SE5.

Semi-serious

Sir,

How can any person or thing be "semi-totalitarian"? (Muckspreader, Eye 1145.)

Yours semi-faithfully,
HUGH BICKERTON,

Co. Leitrim.

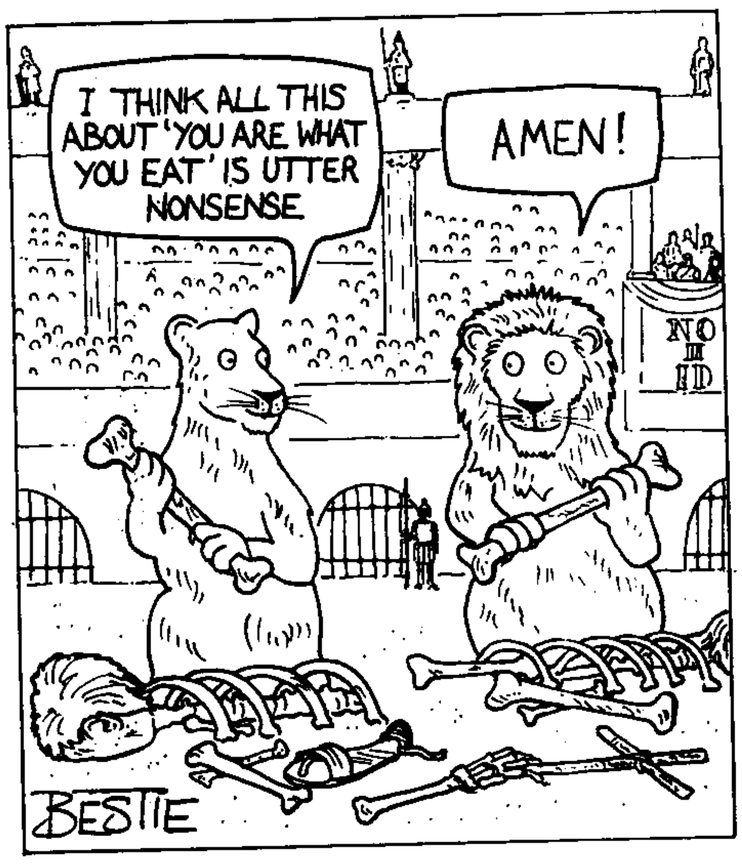
Listing badly

Sir,

Re: your piece on "London's best-sellers", Heywood Hill Bookshop is in Mayfair rather than Bloomsbury. The London Review Bookshop, however, is in Bloomsbury and also contributes to the Evening Standard's rather eccentric list each week: in contrast to Heywood Hill, most of the titles we submit never appear in the paper!

Sincerely,
ANDREW STILWELL,

Manager, The London Review Bookshop.



Colemanballs

£10 paid for contributions

"... it was the icing on the cake of disappointment."
JAMES SIMPSON-DANIEL
(Tim Freeman)

"Bolton's plan is to put Arsenal on the back foot in the air."
GARTH CROOKS, BBC Interactive
(Francis R. Fox)

"Thornton... was the best man on the field by a long way, but the rest of the Rovers team weren't far behind him."
Doncaster Rovers website
(Christopher Collett))

"I only speak French, I don't speak anything else?"
KRISTIN SCOTT-THOMAS, GMTV
(Kevin Marsh)

"It's very difficult to walk a tightrope around these issues"
Radio 4
(N. Harper)

SOLUTIONS

"New underwire camisoles: the perfect layering solution" – *underwear*

"Bean 2 Cup Workplace Coffee Solutions" – *drink vending machines*

"Creative Learning Solutions offer solution-focused seminars" – *teacher training*

"Bridge McFarland Haddon Owen: providing effective legal solutions" – *solicitors*

"SG Private Banking: Imagine Solutions Inspired by You. Flexible and varied, our solutions reflect your individual circumstances" – *bank*

"Defence Estates: Delivering Estate Solutions to Defence Needs" – *soldiers' houses*

All submitted by readers

Lunchtime O'Balls

Sir,

Lunchtime O'Boulez is as ill-informed as the accountants for the orchestras presently coming under the scrutiny of Revenue & Customs.

The employment status of workers has been in the public domain for several years, and has been aggressively pursued by Revenue & Customs.

Any accountant worth his salt who didn't know about this isn't, er, worth his salt, or his fee. An amnesty was on offer from Revenue & Customs to any employer who got their act together, but the orchestras either chose to ignore this or were very badly advised indeed.

Revenue & Customs' present inquiries are, therefore, neither reprehensive nor opportunistic. The orchestras affected are being subjected to the exact same principles of employment which apply to every other industry throughout the country.

Yours in accountancy,
IAN ALLINGHAM,

Via email.

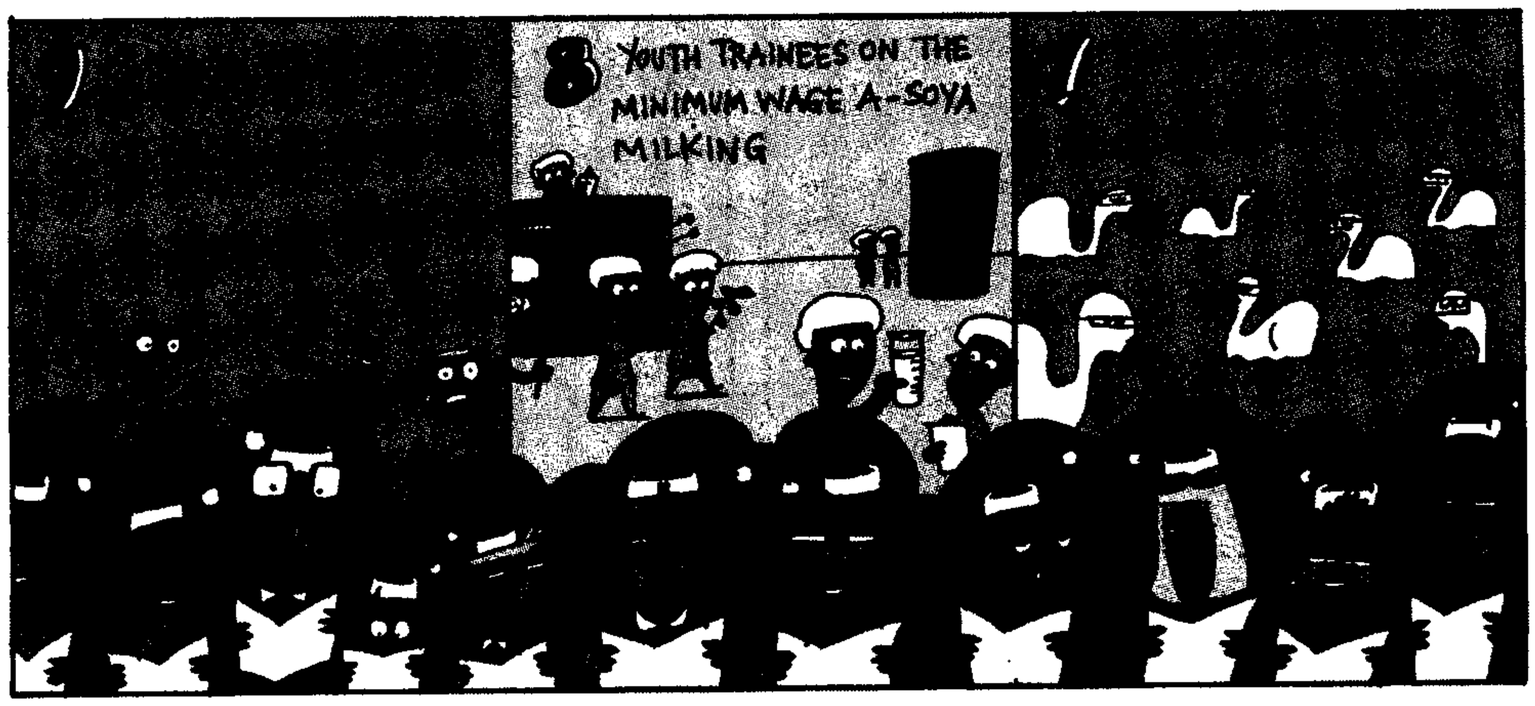
PS: Watch this space for local health trusts, who appear to be unable to get this right too.

During an earthquake

If you are unable to leave the building, take shelter in a pre-determined life triangle. Lie on your side in the fatal position and place your hands on your head.

Polat Renaissance Hotel, Istanbul

TWELVE GRIM DAYS OF CHRISTMAS KNIFE & PACKER



Letter from **Israel**

from Our Own Correspondent

HANUKKAH is the Jewish festival at which we celebrate our freedom to practise our religion, won in 168 BC by the Maccabees against the Greek occupiers of our country. This year the festival falls on the same day as Christmas, celebrated by thousands of Palestinians under our rule, but we can't see the irony.

Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, has become almost unreachable for local Christians. People living a mere 10 minutes away are prevented from travelling there by the closure of what used to be public roads to Palestinians. Not only does this create a smooth traffic flow, but it helps the locals accept our view that all resistance to our occupation equals terrorism.

Meanwhile the surrounding biblical landscape is changing, the pinewood hills replaced by Israeli settler villas. The 4,000-year-old town is encased by a network of 10-ft concrete walls and electric fences. When work on them is complete, it will leave only two small gates, guarded by Israeli soldiers, through which local people will need permission to pass. Already, Bethlehem's churches stand empty on Sundays.

Restricted access has also wiped out Bethlehem's main source of income, the tourist trade. Tour companies avoid it, as they may be barred or have to wait for hours at an army checkpoint. A flourishing town of hotels and shops selling olive wood crosses has become a centre of mass unemployment.

Separation walls are not confined to Bethlehem. Those built across the West Bank by that new icon of centrist politics, Ariel Sharon, prevent farmers from harvesting their crops and families from reaching medical care. Entry to Jerusalem is increasingly denied to Palestinians, unless they live there. Pupils returning to their school in its Muslim quarter after a weekend away found that the Israeli army had built a huge wall across their playground.

In the West Bank village of Anata, plans for extending the nearby separation wall prompted an army order for the demolition of the Palestinian homes along its route. The owners were told of the order the night before, which gave them ample time to pile up their belongings outside in the rain. In the spirit of the approaching festivities, though, a concession was made. One household was told that if it demolished half the building itself, the army would merely brick up the other half.

This network of walls and fences does not, heaven forbid, represent Israel's new border. It merely fragments Palestinian West Bank territory, thus ruling out a Palestinian state. By making jobs scarce and normal life impossible, it also encourages emigration. We really can't see why people are so determined to live in their Holy Land.

None of this implies that Israelis do not like Christians. We just prefer the kind who live further away. Thus, during one of Sharon's last weeks in the now defunct Likud-Labour government, the Knesset held a special reception for John Hagee of the US evangelical movement. A staunch Zionist, Pastor Hagee supports all of Israel's settlement projects. It was left to an American journalist to point out that this is because the honoured guest believes that settlement speeds up the return of all Jews to the Holy Land and therefore the final battle between good and evil, to be fought in the Israeli town of Meggido.

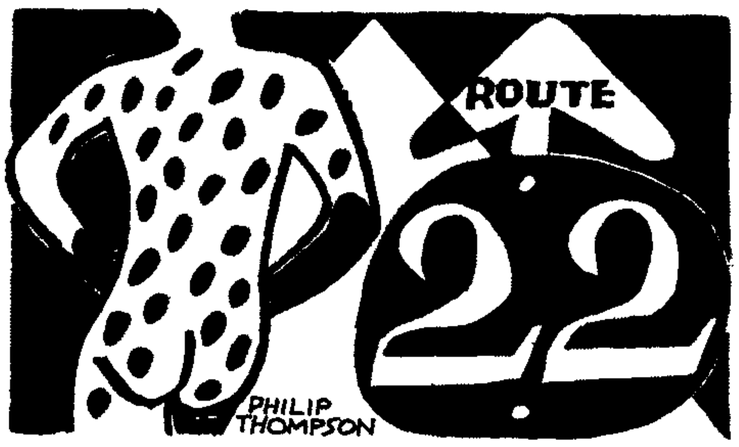
Once the Jews had won, so Hagee's reading of the bible told him, most would embrace Christianity. This would be followed by the end of the world, heralded by a moment of "Rapture" during which all unconverted Jews would descend into hell, while he and his followers would ascend to heaven. As the kind preacher put it: "We are racing toward the end of time, and Israel lies in the eye of the storm." Just the kind of Christian friends one wants…

FUNNY OLD WORLD

COMPILED BY **VICTOR LEWIS-SMITH**

● "I was devastated when Gail ended our relationship," Ken Slaby told the jury in a Pittsburgh court, "but that was five years ago, and I got over it. I was in a new relationship when she phoned to invite me to her Murrysville home, to rekindle our friendship. I went there for dinner in all innocence. I had no idea she wanted revenge, and would commit such inhumane acts on my body."

He then described what took place at the house of Gail O'Toole, events which led to her being charged with assault. "She became



angry over dinner when I talked about my new lover, but things calmed down, and I agreed to stay the night. She waited until I was asleep, naked, then superglued my penis to my stomach, glued my buttocks together, and painted Elvis-style sideburns and purple polka dots all over my body. I woke in severe pain. I felt like my groin was on fire. It was all stuck together, and my head was blue, purple, and red. Gail just laughed, then threw me out. I was so confused that I don't remember much after that. Apparently, I was found waddling naked along Route 22, the police were called, and I was taken to hospital where a dermatologist had to operate. Gail says it was all part of our routine sexual activity, but that isn't true."

O'Toole was found guilty of misdemeanour assault, and sentenced to six months' probation. *(Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 4/11/05. Spotter: James Carter)*

– ● –

● *Sir, I was listening to a radio debate on euthanasia, and they were saying it could soon be legalised. I've long cherished ambitions of becoming a euthanasia dispatcher, and I consider myself, via my butchery experience, well qualified to administer the humane dispatch.*

But I am not interested in lethal injection. No, I would consult with people who want to die and discuss the manner in which they want to go. Gentlemen, for example, used to prefer to be strangled with a silk garrotte, and I would keep that tradition alive.

What I would like to know is, how do I go about applying for a licence? Do I apply to the council office at Wem, to the magistrates, or directly to the Home Office? As there are no text books on this subject, I would be grateful for advice. I don't want to break the law, but there are plenty of people out there who would want to use my services.

Lastly, may I clear up some local misapprehensions about me? It is true that I once attended court covered in manure and wearing a pig's head. Also that I once dressed as Father Christmas and scaled the roof at Shrewsbury Prison, to give cigarettes to the inmates. But I deny rumours that I have ever nailed my ears to a tree. That is a lie.

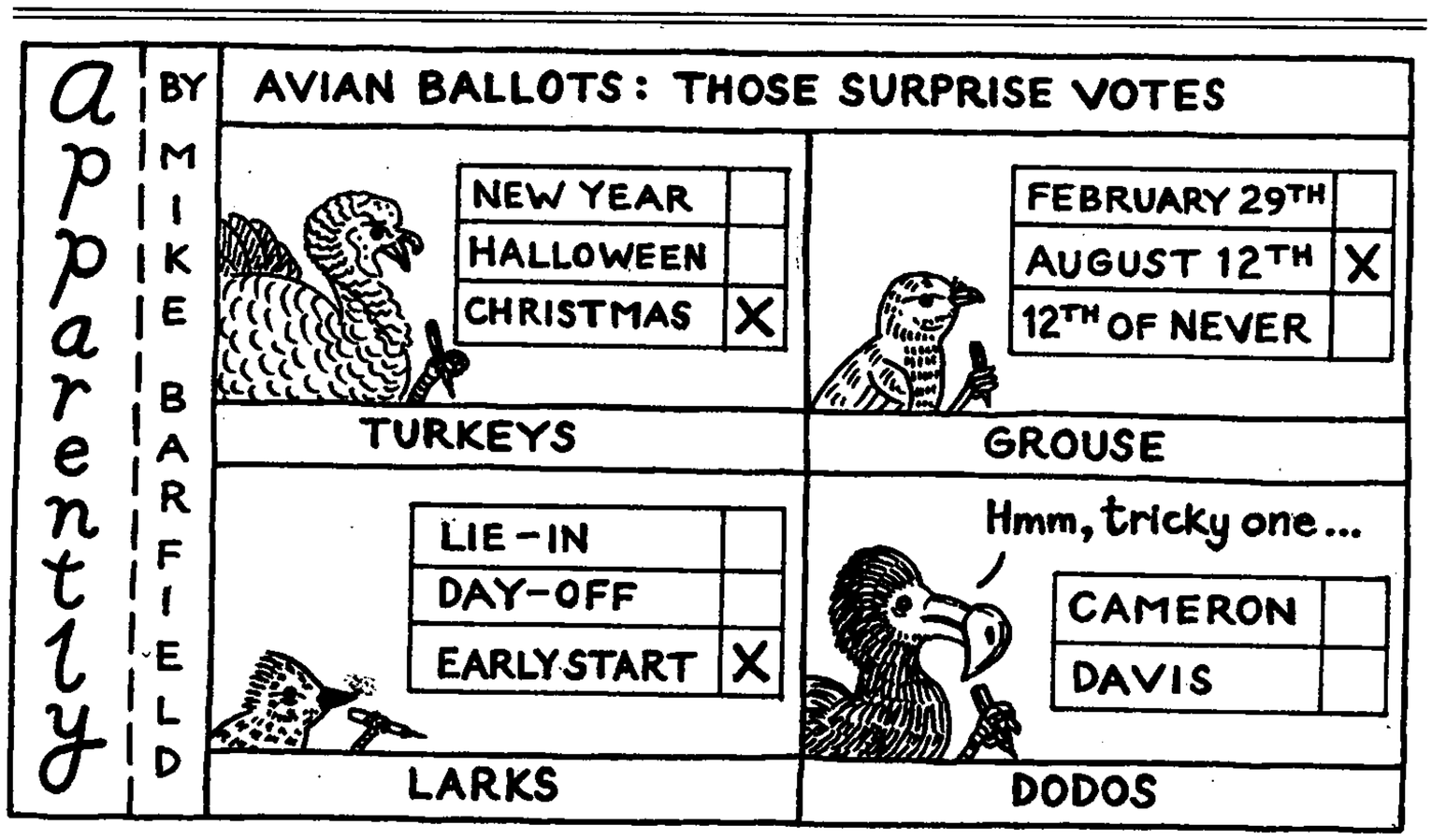
Yours sincerely, Derek Podmore. (Market Drayton Advertiser, 22/7/05. Spotter: R. Underwood)

– ● –

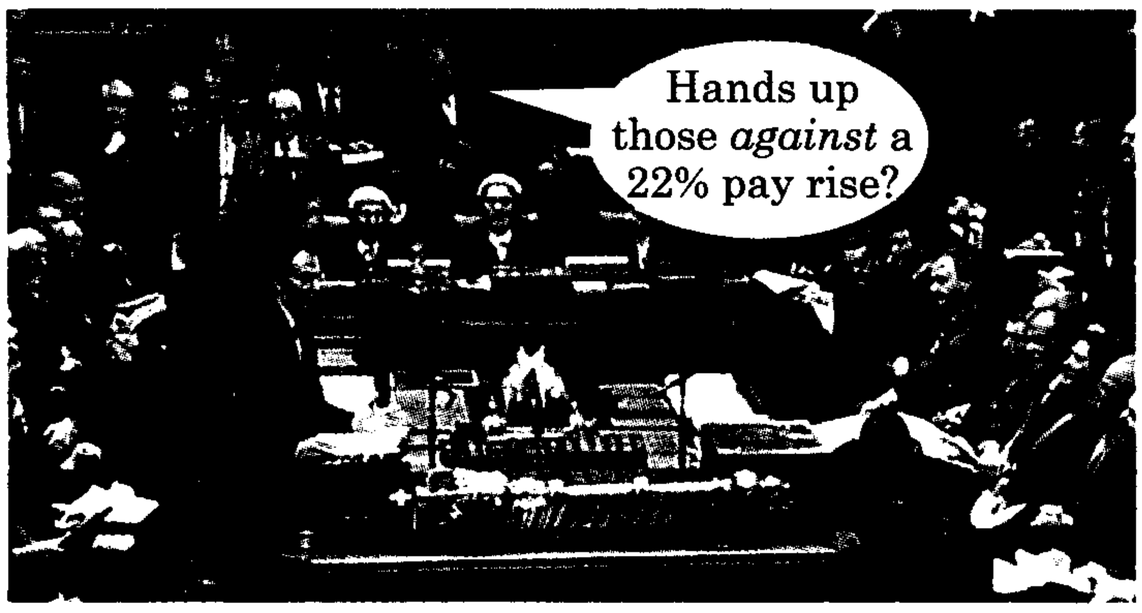
● "We find it hard to believe that a cat could chew off a human's toes," Shizue Noda of the Animal Support Mate group told reporters in Saitama (Japan), "and I've certainly never heard of it happening before. We suspect the poor animal has been framed by someone who cut the woman's toes off himself, then lured the cat to the scene of the crime and smeared it with blood, so it would look like the culprit. There's only circumstantial evidence that the cat was responsible, and we think he's innocent, so it would be wrong for the authorities to put him down, merely on suspicion."

Noda was speaking after an eighty-eight-year-old woman in the Kitasaitama old people's home was found with all the toes on her right foot missing. "There was blood everywhere when I entered her room," said the nurse who reported the incident, "and I saw straightaway that her toes had gone. She has senile dementia, and wasn't aware of what had happened, but I was. Her window was open, there were bloody paw prints all over the room, and there was the cat in the corner with blood caked round its mouth. How much more proof does anyone need?"

But animal activists were unconvinced. "Someone may have used a decoy," said Noda. "We demand that the cat's life is spared, until the matter has been looked into properly." *(Mainichi Daily, 13/10/05. Spotter: Eric Houlden)*



SHOCK COMMONS VOTE



CAMERON RELATED TO EVERYONE

by Our Geneological Staff **Hugh Montgomery Massivesnob**

THE NEW Tory leader, David Cameron, is directly related to all famous people in English history, I can reveal. They range from the Venerable Bede to Nell Gwynne to Camilla Parker-Bowles. Research has shown he is even a distant cousin of Lord Nelson *(81 times removed. Ed)*.

His wife Lady Rowena Starborgling-Cameron is a descendant of Grand Duchess Anastasia of Saxe-Carlsberg via her illegitimate son, Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare (see the latter's autobiography 'The Story of My Lie', Wormwood and Scrubs, £19.99).

Another distant relative turns out to be Lord Byron, through the marriage of Cameron's great-uncle Sir Charles Moore who famously fell in the Battle of Canary Wharfe, slain by the Black Knight in 2003.

But, most surprising of all, the future Prime Minister of Great Britain is related to the popular entertainers Ant and Dec (real names Sir Anthony Antrobus and Sir Decwell Lozenge who were both contemporaries of Cameron at St Cake's Prep School).

Full story page 94

NEW FILMS FOR CHRISTMAS

The Liar, The Witch and The Warmonger

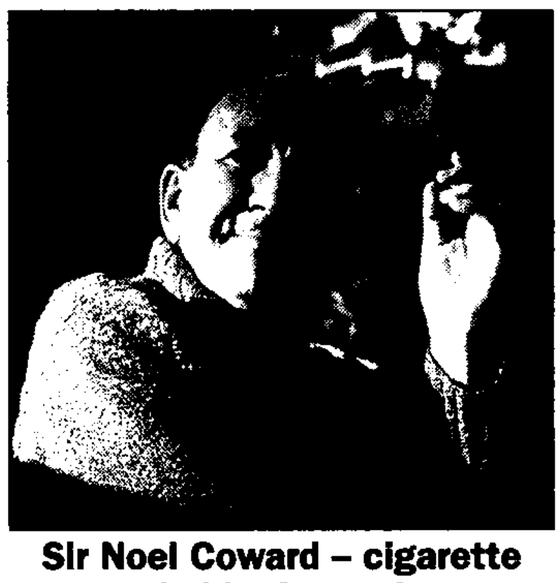
Heartwarming family entertainment with a subtle religious message. Enjoy a fairytale world where nothing is quite what it seems, where weapons magically appear and disappear and where mysterious CIA planes arrive in the night and then fly off to far-away lands.

Eye Rating: Torture!!

"Job for life, sorting out the pensions..."

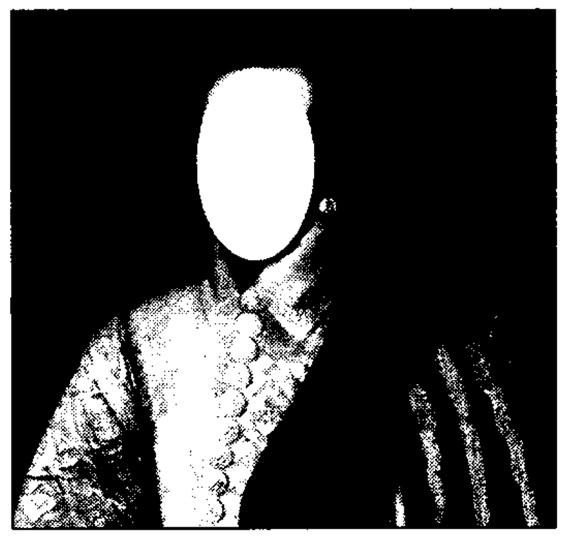
Those Censored Primary School Pictures In Full

Brunel – offending cigar removed



Sir Noel Coward – cigarette holder banned

Sherlock Holmes – no to pipe



Sir Walter Raleigh, discoverer of tobacco – never existed

POLLY SLAGG

THE GLENDA OF THE GRAUNIAD!!!

■ **ASLAN – donchahatehim? With his stupid mane and his silly roar and his holier-than-thou goody-two-shoes act!!??? Doesn't he make you want to puke as he goes round sucking up to middle-class children and prosecuting strong, independent women like the white witch??!?**

■ GUESS who I've had enough of!?!! Here's a clue!! He's got four legs, a bushy tail and he's trying to brainwash our kiddies!!?? Yes, it's you, Aslan!!! Tell you what, here's a not very hidden message from Auntie Polly – sod off back into the wardrobe where you belong and don't come out again!!?? Geddit??

■ *C.S. LEWIS??!? Donchajust hate him???!*

■ **WARDROBES – arenchasick-ofthem??!**

■ Lions – Bastards!!! *(Get on with it. Ed.)*

Here they are, Polly's Christmas Creeps!!!

● **Aslan** – he's the stoopid lion from Narnia??!

● **C.S. Lewis** – what a bastard! No wonder he's dead!!!?

● **Aslan** – *(You're fired. Ed.)*

ST ALBION PARISH NEWS

Incumbent: Rev A.R.P. Blair MA (Oxon)

Hullo!

And this is the time of year when our thoughts turn to the less fortunate members of our community, particularly, of course, the elderly.

And, you know, I often think that one of my greatest privileges as your vicar is to be able to help old people in a very real way.

That's why I asked Mr Turner, one of our local businessmen, to spend a couple of years looking long and hard at how best we can assist our senior parishioners to enjoy the twilight of their lives.

Well, Mr Turner has finally come up with his 8,000-page report, which is available on the table in the porch, and I do strongly urge you to spend a few moments reading it on your way out of church.

Mr Turner really has done a marvellous job, and I am sure that in due course we shall be acting on every one of his excellent suggestions.

His main suggestion is that, with all of us living much longer these days, the so-called 'twilight' period of our lives should begin much later, some time between 75 and 100.

Hey, that makes sense, doesn't it?

Another of Mr Turner's very good ideas is that lots of people don't want to retire and spend the rest of their lives gardening, playing golf and going on cruises to the fjords.

No, they want to carry on working as long as they can, making a useful contribution to society, by taking satisfying part-time manual work, such as digging coal, mending the roads or stacking the shelves in Tesco.

Do you remember those wonderful words of St Paul in his Letters to the Liverpudlians: *"Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64?"*

Well, we certainly will – except, of course, that we won't have to feed you any more because you'll all have one of Mr Turner's Britsaver pension schemes, and anyway who thinks of 64 as being old nowadays?

I'm sure that if St Paul was still with us today, he would be only too happy to support Mr Turner by changing the words of his famous epistle to *"when I'm 94"*!

So, it's great stuff from Mr Turner! A message of real hope, compassion and goodwill, at this season of Christmas/ Hanukkah/Diwali/Sudoku or whatever you have chosen to believe in this year!

So, what a pity that one or two people (well, one to be precise) have chosen to adopt a thoroughly negative and unhelpful attitude to Mr Turner's admirable proposals!

I don't want to name names (but I think our Treasurer may know who I'm talking about!) when I refer to the person who couldn't even wait for the report to be placed in the porch before announcing to anyone who was prepared to listen that Mr Turner didn't know what he was talking about.

"How can we afford it?" says our Scottish friend, who thinks these proposals of Mr Turner's are just pie-in-the-sky!

Does such a response remind us of another famous Christmas character?

No, not Father Christmas, Mustafa. He's the one who believes in giving at Christmas, not taking away!

I am thinking of a mean and miserly old Caledonian gentleman, who sits all day and all night counting his money (and usually getting it wrong!).

Yes, Sonali, it's our old friend from Charles Dickens, Ebenezer Scrooge!

And we all know what happened to him in the Good Book, don't we?

He got his comeuppance, didn't he, when he burst into flames and was reduced to a pile of ashes?

Of course, no one is suggesting that anything like that is going to happen to Mr Brown, although might it not be quite appropriate if it did! There's something for us all to pray for during this Advent (from the Greek *'ad-ventos'*, meaning 'a calendar full of chocolates')!

One thing Mr Turner didn't get round to proposing was the case of someone who, although still relatively young, has been stuck in the same job for many years, and would benefit from immediate early retirement? Perhaps to a remote island off the coast of his native Scotland! No offence, Gordon, but how does that old hymn go again – *"Will ye no come back again – please"*?!!!

Yours, Tony

KEEPY UPPY!

A sad picture of a middle-aged man trying to play football! Another own goal, I'm afraid, Gordon!!! T.B.

Parish Postbag

Dear Sir,

*I was shocked, as I am sure were all other parishioners, by the unhelpful comments of the Parish Treasurer in relation to our (well, **my**!) European Mission. It is quite wrong for Mr Brown to criticise the vicar over his commitment to Europe when we all know that Gordon is much more of a eurosceptic at heart and anyway is simply trying to undermine the vicar in a silly bitchy way – it is just like all these people who are trying to make trouble for me and my house guest Rinaldo's charming friend Brazilio da Novisa.*

Yours absolutely livid,
P. Mandelson, Rue des Matelots, Bruxelles

A sad picture of a boy in the parish who is going round pretending to be me – even ordering cups of tea to try and persuade people that he is the vicar! If you see this boy, can you please report him to the local Neighbourhood Watch before he breaks into the vicarage and takes over! T.B.

TV CORNER!

If anyone missed the Vicar's wife's wonderful new TV programme "I am a Golfish" about life in the vicarage, they will be able to obtain a DVD of the broadcast at a modest price of £27.99p. in fact even if you did see it, you will obviously want to see it again! And indeed we insist you do.

So anyone who fails to order a DVD of this wonderful insight into the life of goldfish will be visited by Mr Campbell and asked to explain why.

WARNING: He knows where you live.

St Albion's Primary School

Mrs Kelly writes: Next term we are going to introduce a new idea, which I am sure all parents will want to know about! It is called READING. Children are shown words in a book, and are told how to "read" them. Does it sound complicated? It's actually very easy, and children soon get the hang of it! So let's all give it a go, shall we, and if you have any problems or queries, please don't write to me or come to see me, because I am a very busy person. R.K.

Thought For The Day

In Favour of Temperance

The sad death of George Best is a reminder to us all of the perils of over-indulgence in alcohol. I do not have to look far in my own family circle to find an example of a man who was once a great talent, but who succumbed to the demon drink. I'm thinking of my poor father-in-law Tony Booze who has begun to rant and rave about me, suggesting that I am not up to the job as vicar! I am sure it is just the drink talking but, even so, it is a tragic state of affairs. Perhaps, now that Tony Booze has moved to Ireland, he won't come back and, like poor George Best, will be laid to rest beneath the emerald sod. May he rest in peace.

BLAIR'S CONTROVERSIAL NEW POWER PLAN

by Our Energy Staff **Sally Field** and **Don Jeunesse**

THE Prime Minister last night unveiled his new proposals for power which would, he said, "take Britain into the 22nd Century".

He made clear that there was only one solution to the current shortfall in power and it was not the fashionable option that so-called experts were proposing.

Hot Blair

"Wind isn't the answer," he said, "even though there is a plentiful supply of it close to hand.

"No," he concluded, "the time has come to recommission myself so that I can stay in power well into the future."

His announcement was greeted by a furious protest as one person gathered to voice his concerns.

Said the demonstrator, a Mr Gordon Brown, "Blair power is extremely dangerous and creates huge problems for hundreds of years. It damages the environment and generates vast amounts of toxic waste. Its time is over."

Brown Is New Green

Police were quick to break up the protest on the grounds of Prevention of Terror. Said the Chief Inspector, "Brown could blow up at any moment. He is an accident waiting to happen."

IRAQ EXCHANGE AND MART

WANTED: TWO DEFENCE LAWYERS

Saddam Hussein and his co-defendants are looking for two defence lawyers.

The position would suit lawyers with considerable experience of ducking, or who preferably are bullet-proof.

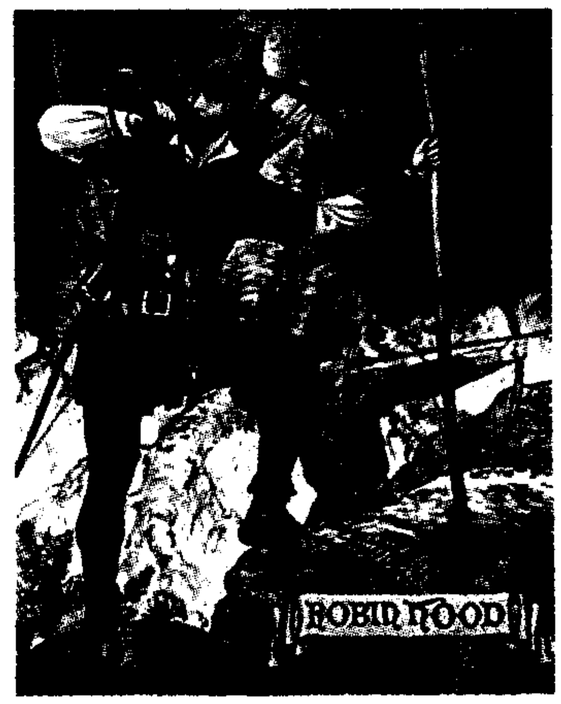
Please apply in writing to Saddam, Cell 43, Baghdad State Penitentiary.

THE BRUSSELS FAIRY STORY COLLECTION

(compliant with EC directive 2004/27 on the harmonisation of folk tales)

No. 94 The Tale of Robin Hood And His Merry Men

(as adapted by Jose Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission)



LONG AGO in England there was an evil outlaw called Robin Blair, living deep in the forest with his band of robbers. Robin and his outlaw band were very rich from their years of stealing from the poor, particularly from honest French farmers.

But the heroic Sheriff of Brussels, myself, finally tired of Robin's arrogance and greed and said, "Enough is enough".

"Look at these poor Polish potato growers and Maltese bird-catchers, who are starving to death. Why cannot Robin Blair give me back some of his ill-gotten gains, so that I can redistribute them to the poor and needy, taking a small percentage of 80 percent to cover the costs of administration?"

At first, Robin said, "My ill-gotten gains will remain mine and are totally non-negotiable". But eventually he gave in, as per usual.

© The EU, 2005.

Have you been good this year?
Well, it's been a tough one due to global factors beyond my control which have led to a disappointing
(cont. 2094)

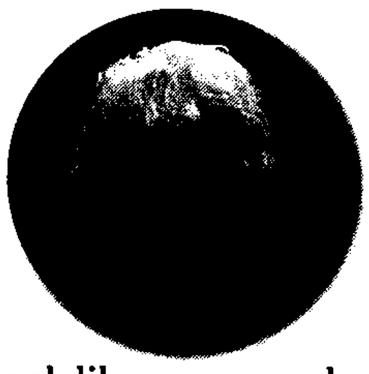
Simon Hoggart's Hilarious Collection Of Seasonal Round-Robins From Britain's Families!

Dear All,
Well, it's been quite a year for the Quinn Family! Kimberly's gone back to work after a bit of a break to get over all that business with the former Home Secretary and that bastard columnist from the Guardian *(cont. p. 94)*

Dear Friends
What a year for the Blunkett family! David has got a new job working for the Sun (or rather his son, given all the legal bills to pay!), still it's not very hard work this journalism – no wonder that bastard columnist from the Guardian had time to go round shagging Kimberly in the *(cont. p. 94)*

Dear All,
Quite an eventful year for the family Hoggart! Full of amusing, laughable and ridiculous happenings! Things got off to a hilarious start when Simon was revealed to have been *(cont. p. 94)*

GNOME'S XMAS



Speak like renowned art critic Brian Sewell in only five months!

THOUSANDS envy silver-tongued connoisseur Brian Sewell for his perfect diction and mastery of the age-old art of elocution. Now, thanks to Gnomaudio you can learn to speak the same way.

Says Sewell: *"Buy these superb tapes, you wretched miserable little people."*

Set of 70 £496.99

Teenagers! Fool your parents with:

NOVEL-TV™

The hand-held TV set that looks just like a book! Mum and Dad think you're actually reading your GCSE set text, but really you're watching Friends for the 187th time!!

Comes in: Great Expectations, To Kill A Mockingbird, Shakespeare's Complete Works.

Says TV's Ant and Dec, "Why bother reading when you can watch us 24 hours a day?"

Price: £87.99

AT LAST! UNDER-WATER SUDOKU!

No more I've-got-to-stop-doing-my-sudoku-puzzle-to-go-for-a-swim misery with the amazing Underwater Sudoku System from North Korea!

Now you can put that number '5' or '7' in the top box even when 30 feet under water!

Price: £25.99 per 1,000 puzzles

Says TV's Carol Vorderman: "When I'm at the bottom of the Pacific I can rely on Underwater Sudoku to while away those idle hours!"

WARNING: Puzzles may not work if they come into contact with water.

Theatregoers! Bored by the Play? Now you can doze in peace with

DRAMAT-EYES™

Just slip on your specially adapted spectacles, each lens fitted with lifelike open eye, and friends will think you're really enjoying the show. Complete with discreet handy carrying case.

● *Ideal for Royal Opera House, Ben Elton, Peter Hall etc.*

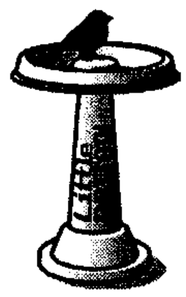
The Kate Moss SNOW SHAKER

Innocent fun for kids with this charming celebrity seasonal scene!
With *real* flakes!

Price: £99.99 per gram

Little BRITAIN **Bird Bath**

Now you too can be part of the Little Britain craze and own " the only bird bath in the village!"



Says TV's **Matt Lucas:** *"Yeah but no but I want that one!"*

Made from authentic Gnomolene, this stylish plastic bird bath gives your feathered friends the comedy splash-about of their dreams!!

£995.99

Plays theme from TV's League of Gentlemen

New From Silicon Value!!!

The 'i-Press'

IT'S the must-have present this Christmas! The 'i-Press' is a miniature, mobile, hand-held trouser-press that can download thousands of trousers from your wardrobe and press them at the touch of a button. Incredible? Just you try it on your favourite Chinos and you'll never use an old-fashioned trouser-press again!

Price: £2,998.99

COLOURS: Pink Floyd, Simply Red, Black Sabbath.

Energy Savers!

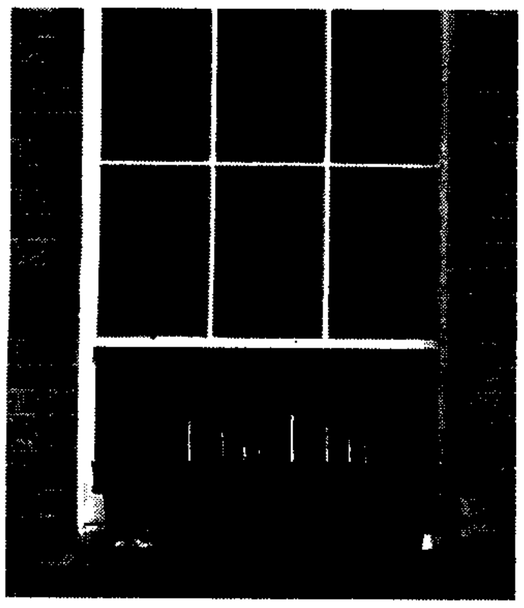
The Bonsai Wind Farm

This amazing miniature marvel harvests the power of the wind from your window box and converts it into green energy.

Your wind farm, standing no more than 3 ins high, can generate enough electricity for your toothbrush to work for 1½ minutes, saving you a fortune and reducing your deadly CO_2-releasing energy consumption.

Price: £873,000 per mini-turbine

● Says the Guardian's George Monbiot, "Save the planet! And your money!"



● *Colours: Philip Green, Sarah Green, Graham Greene.*

Gnomes Past

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN CONDOM

NOW you too can enjoy the delights of Cleopatra's naughty nights on the Nile with this 100% authentic prophylactic made from genuine Egyptian papyrus. Step back thousands of years to the love rites of Old Egypt.

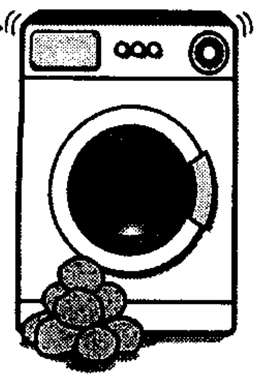
***STYLES:* Tutankhamun, Rameses III, Mohamed Fayed.**

£32.99 *(packet of three)*

SPUD-U-WASH!

The Washing Machine That Thinks It's A Potato Peeler!

● **NEW from Vladivostok, the home of the potato/ washing machine, comes this breakthrough in washing machine/ potato technology. One minute it's washing your whites – the next it's scrubbing your spuds!**



Says Chelsea owner ROMAN ABRAMOVICH: "I wouldn't wash the team shirts in anything else – nor peel the team's pre-match potatoes!"

£593.99

MAILMART

COLLECTORS!

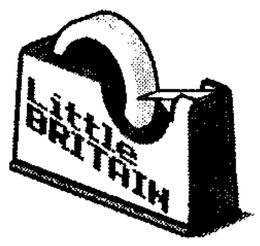
Rescued from the wreck of the *Gnomitania*. As new! The *Gnomitania* sailed from Plymouth in 1822 with a hoard of freshly minted euros.

After long years on the seabed, these precious euros have been salvaged and can at last be yours!

★ *Authenticated as genuine by the late Professor Hugh Trevor Roper.*

Each coin £99.99

Little BRITAIN Sellotape Dispenser



Join the Little Britain craze as you dispense sellotape at your desk!

Says TV's **David Walliams**: *"I'm a Laydee so I like to dispense my sellotape from this special themed dispenser!!"*

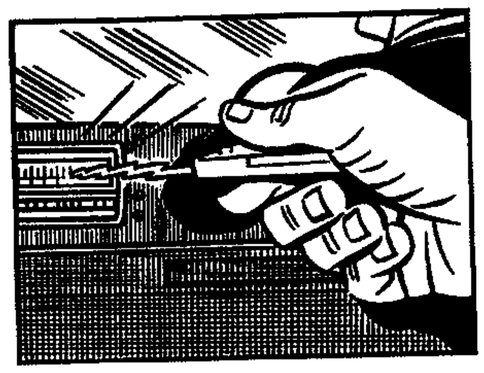
Colours: *Pee Green! Poo Brown! Vomit Yellow!*

£799.35 *(Not including sellotape or dispenser)*

Say Goodbye to unwanted Taxi Radio thanks to

CABJAM

WATCH your cabbie's face fall when Cabjam silences the football commentary on Radio 5 Live! Fits easily into the average-sized suitcase.



♟♟♟♟♟♟ **£500,000**

Gnomes Past

THE CELTIC MEMORY STICK

ANCIENT legends tell of the magic sticks imbued with wondrous powers of memory that were created on the islands of Intel and Pentium by the early Caledonian sages. Now you too can experience their mystical properties with this historically accurate granite reproduction of an 11th Century 40-gigabyte storage device of the type used by St Hewlett of Packard. **£399.99**

COLOURS: David Gray, Joss Stone, Jack Black.

You'll always know where you are with

PAV-NAV™

The on-head satellite navigation system for pedestrians!

Pav-Nav has been developed by NASA and employs a dedicated geostatic satellite that pinpoints exactly where you are and where you want to go!* Pavements, footpaths, fields, hills, Tesco's!... You'll never get lost again!

Choose your guiding voice from the following:
● *Neil Armstrong* ● *Sir Ranulph Fiennes* ● *Captain Oates*

£373,432.99

** To be launched by 2022*

Art Lovers! *Give your loved ones a fright this Xmas with*

THE SIR NICHOLAS SEROTA Horror Mask

Children will gasp when they see Tate Modern's Art Supremo live in your living room! Hours of fun as the world's craziest curator runs amok in your home! £700,000

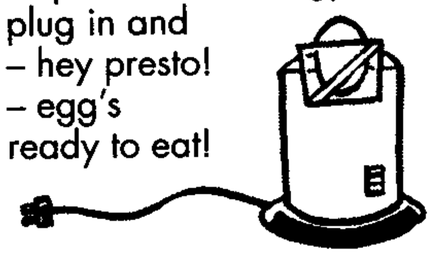
Colours: Elephant Dung

EGG LOVERS!

Introducing from Croatia the

ELECTRIC EGG CUP

No more egg-in-boiling-water misery with the Electric Egg Cup's microchip timer technology. Just plug in and – hey presto! – egg's ready to eat!



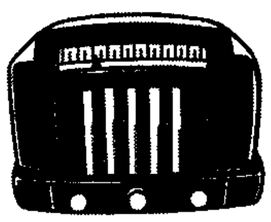
£1.99 *Comes in three sizes: Regular, Large, Ostrich*

Nostalgia Lovers! *Original 1950s*

BLACK & WHITE RADIO!

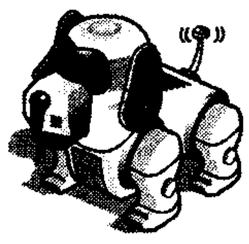
● Do you yearn to listen to your favourite old-time radio shows in black and white – the way they were meant to be heard? The Gnome Service Bakelite De Luxe Wireless™ takes you back to a carefree, bygone era with authentic valve technology. Picks up the following shows:
● *The Goons* ● *Music While You Work* ● *Mrs Dale's Diary* ● *ITMA* ● *Housewife's Choice*
Colours: Black, White, Black and White.

Price £3,965
(plus batteries – no longer available)



Dog-Lovers! Yes, it's

ROBO-ROVER!



THE very latest in cybernetic quadruped technology. "Robo-Rover" is the ultimate hyper-realistic robotic dog.

Robo-Rover ● needs feeding real meat ● Has to be taken for walks 3 times a day ● Poos in the street ● Gets fleas ● Is sick on the carpet ● Runs up £000s in vet fees ● Bites toddler ● Has to be put down (unless run over first).

Why bother with a real dog when you can have all the bother with Robo-Rover?!

£899 ***(batteries extra)***

An end to nuisance calls with

PHONO-SHOCK™

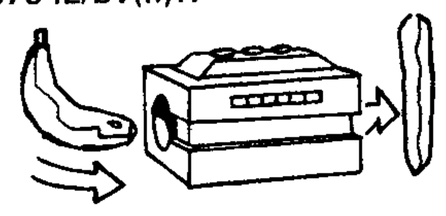
DRIVEN mad by cold calls from insurance companies and double-glazing salesmen? Now you can "return the favour" by sending a 50,000-volt shock down the line into their ear! Just listen as nuisance caller fries at the end of the phone!
(Developed by the Cheney Texas Institute of Electrical Punishment).

£1,578.37

Don't let the EU Inspectors take away your banana... with the new

BANANA STRAIGHTENER™

NOW at last you can avoid the Brussels Bent-Banana Ban with this simple gadget from Oslo. Just pop in curved fruit and, hey presto, you're complying with EU Directive 37942/bv(ii)!!



Plays theme tune from BBC's hit show Bleak House!

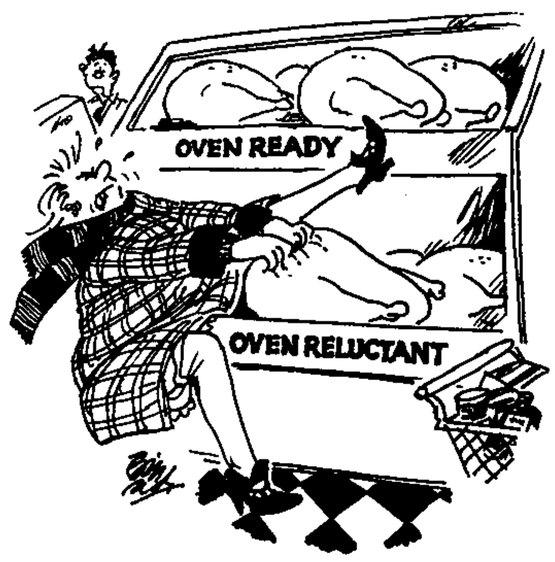
£32.57 *(batteries extra)*

LADIES WEAR
WON'T LIKE
WON'T FIT
ALREADY GOT
-PILBROW-

HOSPITALITY BOX
ROBERT THOMPSON

WARNING! UNATTENDED PACKAGES WILL BE DESTROYED BY CONTROLLED EXPLOSION.
?
arlet

NORTH POLE
Dear Santa
Pearsall.


OVEN READY
OVEN RELUCTANT

ADVENT CALENDAR
PANIC!
PANIC
PANIC
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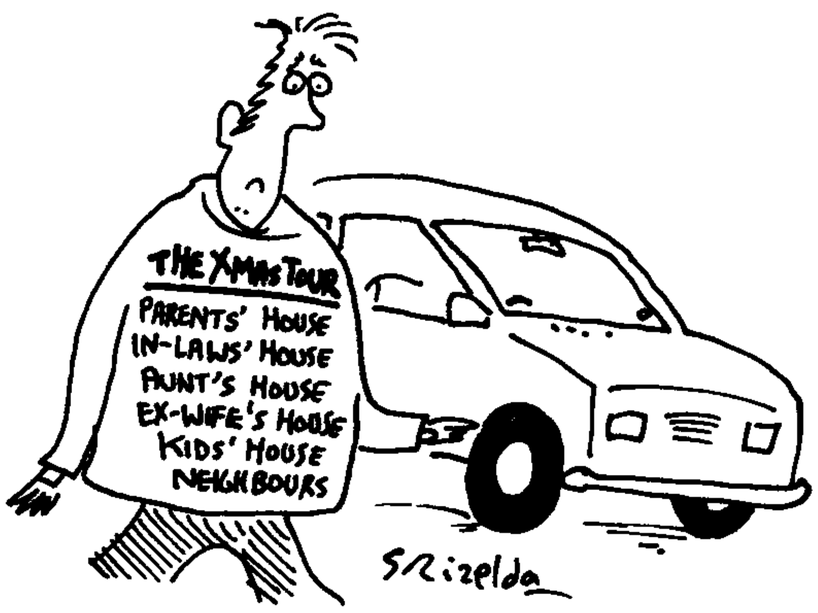
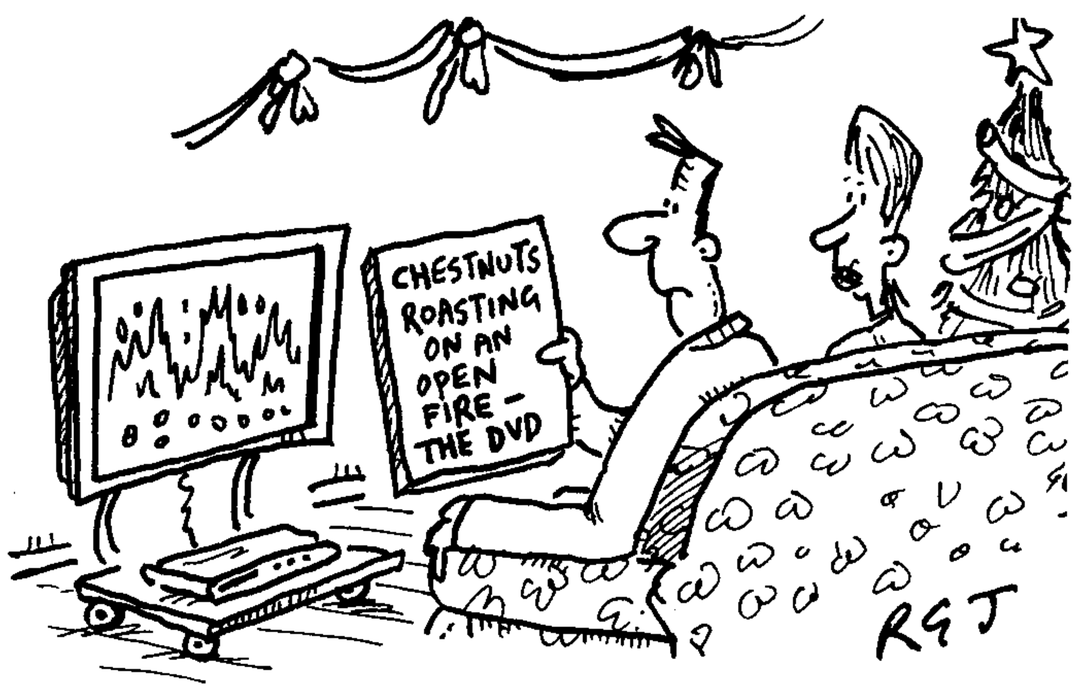
Srizelda


THE XMAS TOUR
PARENTS' HOUSE
IN-LAWS' HOUSE
AUNT'S HOUSE
EX-WIFE'S HOUSE
KIDS' HOUSE
NEIGHBOURS
Srizelda

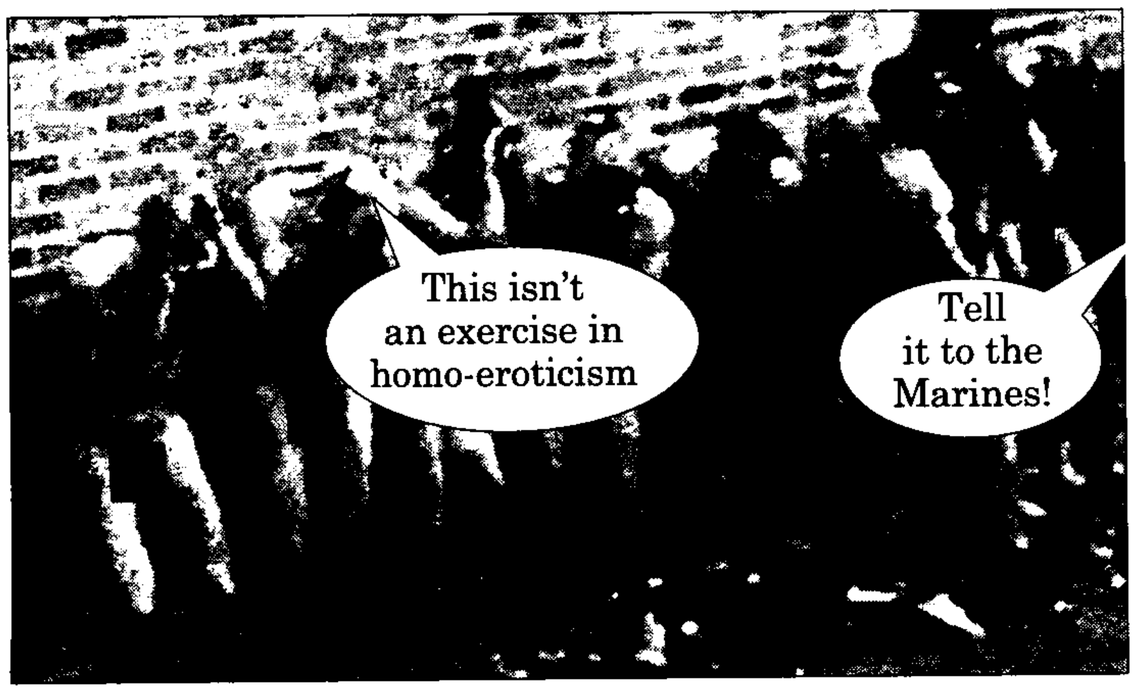
ASBO
ROBERT THOMPSON

iPud

MIRTH
GOLD
FRANK INCENSE
WOODCOCK


CHESTNUTS ROASTING ON AN OPEN FIRE - THE DVD
RGJ

HELLO SAILORS!



ONLY IN THE SUN!!!

THERE'S NOTHING SHAMEFUL ABOUT MARINES VIDEO

by Ex-SAS Hero ANDY McNOBHEAD

LET'S be realistic about this. If people expect the Marines to go around killing people in Iraq and then come home and play Scrabble, they are sorely mistaken.

These soldiers are trained to kill. And if there isn't an enemy to kill, of course they are going to try to kill each other. There is nothing unusual about that. That is what soldiers do. I've lost count of the number of Marines I killed back in the base, just mucking around and having a laugh. It's the soldiers' way and I never heard a single word of complaint afterwards from the Marines I killed.

Far from taking part in a barbaric initiation ceremony, those Marines in the video were, in my opinion, just having a party – much like any office Christmas party where blokes from IT and Accounts are baited by men in drag to fight bloody gladiatorial contests to the death for the amusement of the girls from Personnel.

And so what if some of the officers were dressed in wigs and women's clothing?! That doesn't make them queers or poofs! That is a fact, because if they were poofs or queers, they would have been made to commit suicide long ago. *(That's enough. Ed.)*

INITIATION RITUAL VIDEO CONDEMNED

by Our Military Staff **Minette Marine**

A VIDEO which shows the latest batch of recruits onto 'I'm A Celebrity, Get Me Out Of Here' being taken to the Australian jungle and forced to take part in foul and degrading initiation ceremonies known as 'Bush Tucker Trials', for the amusement of millions of drunken TV viewers, has been labelled sick and repulsive by the Marines.

"We might get our recruits to fight naked until one is unconscious, but we'd never make them endure indignities on this scale" said one marine commander.

"The video showed these X-list nobodies being dropped from a plane, taking cockroach showers and eating live bugs and insects. It's sickeningly barbaric."

However, the producers of the ITV show insisted that the recruits knew what they were getting themselves into and if one or two of them did get hurt or die, it was worth it for the greater ratings.

TYCOON BUYS NEASDEN

by **E.I. Addio**, Our Man In The Asda Stand With The Yoghurt Breakfast Bar And A Copy Of Nutz.

THE SOCCER world was rocked to its foundations last night when it was announced that disgraced Canadian media tycoon Lord Black of Crossdresser had bought the world-famous North Circular League football team Neasden FC for a rumoured £3,000 billion.

Under the floodlights, the club's new owner told cheering fans (Sid and Doris Bonkers) that it had been his lifelong ambition to add the cash-strapped club to his legendary business portfolio.

Said the ashen-faced Neasden manager, Ron Knee, 59, "This is a big day for the Squirrels. Lord Black's unrivalled business contacts and expertise in stealing other people's money will give the lads a much-needed boost."

OWN GOAL

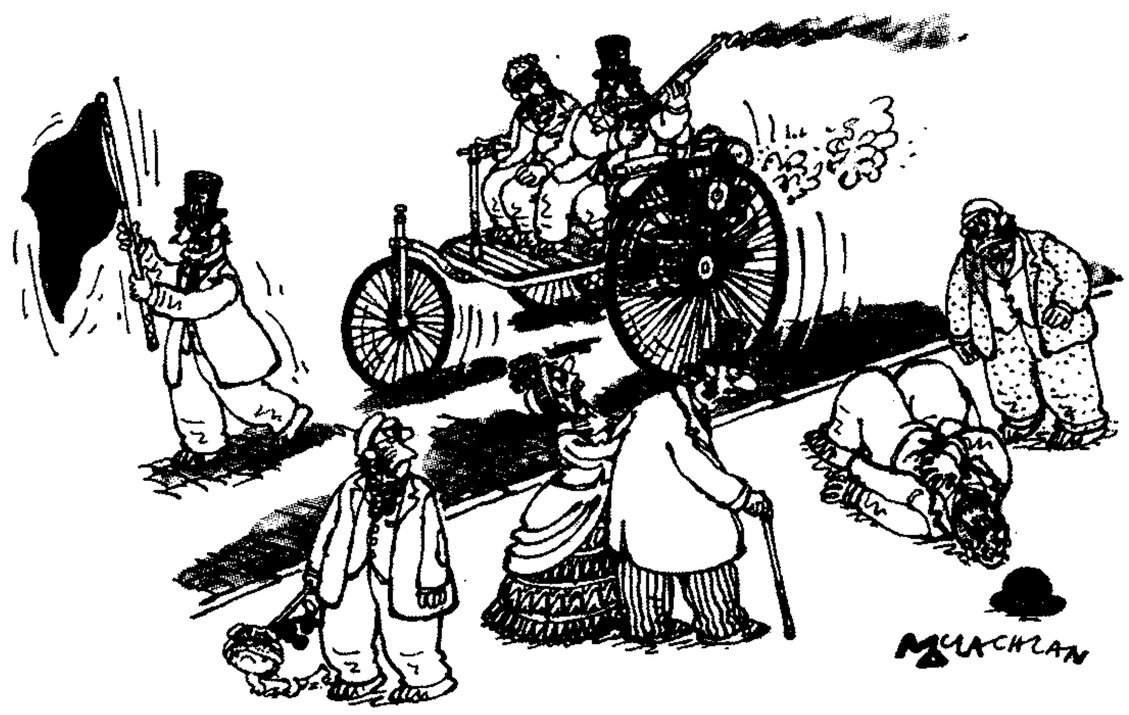
Before the kick-off to last night's local derby against Dollis Hill, Black and his wife took the microphone to sing *"We are the Blacks, everyone hates us, we don't care, we are going to the pen".*

Late Result

Sudoku Charity Shield

AFC Neasden 0
Dollis Hill 2
(Pevsner 2 o.g.)

MONGOL SHOCK



— THE FIRST DRIVE-BY SHOOTING —

HYPERBOLICS ANONYMOUS

FOOTBALLER DIES

A FOOTBALLER, who became well-known for playing football 40 years ago, has died. *Reuters*

ON OTHER PAGES

'Footballer Was Greatest Genius Who Ever Lived' by Everybody **8-16**

'I Saw Footballer Play Football' by Everybody Else **2-7**

'The Tragic "Other Life" Of The Footballer' by All The People Who Haven't Written The Other Pieces **15-30**

'Footballer Was The Love Of My Life Until He Wasn't' write Hundreds Of Women **21-24**

'Footballer Was Heartless Wife-Beater' write Hundreds Of Other Women **26-29**

PLUS

Hundreds of exclusive pictures of footballer playing football **50-64**

Hundreds more pictures of footballer not playing football **65-75**

PLUS

Letters: Footballer was greatest genius who ever lived; No, he was just a footballer; *(That's enough footballer. Ed.)*

TRIBUTES FLOOD IN FOR GEORGE BEST

by **Lifetime O'Booze**

FOLLOWING the death of George Best, tributes flooded in from his fellow professional drinkers up and down the country.

"To have seen George Best drinking in his prime was a magical sight," said Old Pete, a tramp fighting with a lamp-post in Manchester. "He could swerve past three or four regulars, leaving them totally bamboozled, to get to the bar first."

"Whether it was scotch, whiskey or vodka, his handling skills were amazing, both at home and of course in Europe where they favour wider-rimmed glasses," said another drinking pal, sleeping on a bench in Liverpool.

"He was so good they had to take one liver off and try another, but he quickly defeated that too."

"Apparently, he was also a footballer, but he never let that get in the way of his drinking," said another drunken pal in Sheffield, urinating into his trousers in tribute."

There will be a minute's silence at all branches of Oddbins on Monday, to mark George's passing.

POETRY CORNER

In Memoriam Tony Meehan – former member of the Shadows, a popular non-singing group

So. Farewell then
Tony Meehan.

You were one of the
Shadows,
Famous for backing
Sir Clifford
Richard
In such hits as
Living Doll.

Then you left
The group.

Now you are no
Longer living
Yourself.

But you have
Rejoined the
Shadows.

E.J. Thribb (17½ rpm)

THE Sun SAYS

WE say 'String up this amazingly good woman'.

You couldn't make it up. Here's a mum whose son has been axed to death by thugs in broad daylight.

And what does she do? She comes out and says, "I forgive them".

Now we've heard it all! Doesn't this ignorant woman know what she should be saying?

What she should be saying is "String the bastards up".

And this woman calls herself a Christian! Now we've heard it all!

What message is this meant to send to the millions of scumbags roaming the streets, looking for some innocent victim to murder?

We say it again – string this woman up, before her loony message of love and forgiveness sends us all stark raving barmy.

the PREMIERSH*TS

Pat Woop

ROME

What You Missed: Pt 94

(In dimly lit taverna, the "Reginas Victoria")

Grantus Mitchellus: Pompey is marching on Rome!

Philus Mitchellus: I don't believe I'm hearing this.

Grantus Mitchellus: Leave it out!

© BBC MMV

Lines Written On The Projected Return To The Conservative Party Of The Disgraced Peer, Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare

BY THE LATE SIR WILLIAM REES-MCGONAGALL

'Twas in the year two thousand and five
That Lord Archer's hopes of a political comeback began to revive,
So he reapplied to join the Tory Party,
Thinking his welcome would be hale and hearty.

After all, had he not served his time,
As penance for his former heinous crime?
Now, surely, he was rehabilitated,
And by his old friends should once again be fêted?

Not so long ago he was London's most glittering host,
Serving his guests Krug champagne and shepherd's pie on toast.
Lady Thatcher, John Major and Sir David Frost,
He entertained them all, regardless of cost.

So still he nurtured his lifelong dream,
That one day he would exercise power supreme.
First he would return in triumph to the House of Peers
When his speeches would be greeted with unanimous 'hear, hears'.

All his past peccadilloes would be forgotten,
And no one would any longer consider him thoroughly rotten.
Nor would they think it was in any way sinister
That he should still aspire to be prime minister.

But, alas, for the dreams of poor old Jeff,
To all his pleadings, the Tories proved deaf.
As he tried to rejoin them, he fell at the very first hurdle,
As the thought of the great novelist made everyone's blood curdle.

And when he listened for the news on Radio Four,
He heard young David Cameron say, "We don't want him any more.
We don't want his sort in the Tories,
He should just go home and write some more of those appalling stories."

So Jeffrey went home and started his new tale,
About a brilliant writer who had been unjustly sent to gaol,
But when he emerged from his incarceration
He proved everyone wrong, and went on to lead a grateful nation.
(That's enough rubbish. Ed.)

© W. Rees-McGonagall.

This poem can be heard on Andrew Motion's National Archive of Great Poets, available on Eye Pod Cast.

"Well, obviously our congratulations Sir Walter, but you'll forgive us for beginning to question these 'voyages of discovery' we've been financing"

Late News

SOME YOUNG PEOPLE HAVEN'T COMMITTED A CRIME

SHOCKING news emerged yesterday, when figures released showed that there are still some young people in the UK who haven't committed a crime yet.

A government spokesman said, "These figures point to the fact that our record of juvenile delinquency is still some way down on other countries, which simply isn't good enough."

(Rotters)

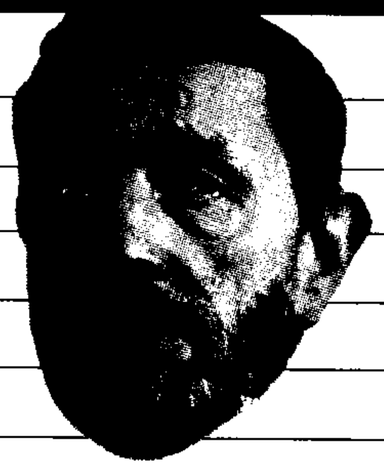
EXCLUSIVE TO ALL PAPERS!

World's Most Difficult Ten-Line Puzzle

Can You Solve It?

T U R N E R P E N S
I O N R E F O R M S
R E J E C T E D B Y
G O R D O N B R O W
N S O H O W I S A N
Y O N E G O I N G T
O L I V E O N A S T
A T E P E N S I O N
T H A T I S W O R T
H B U G G E R A L L

BLUNKETT JOINS THE Sun !!!



Introducing the most exciting and outspoken new journalist in Britain today. He's Frank, Fearless & Frightful!!!

WHAT's gone wrong with us? What a pathetic bunch we have become, a-weepin' and a-wailin' over George Best!

The real heroes of today's Britain are the plucky men and dogs who, when they meet disaster in their personal lives, don't drink themselves to death. No, they pick themselves up, dust themselves down and get a job as a columnist on the Sun!

That's real courage!

THANK goodness some men have still got the courage to cry openly on television!

When I lost my job (first time round!) and was denied access to my little lad, I don't mind admitting that I wept buckets!

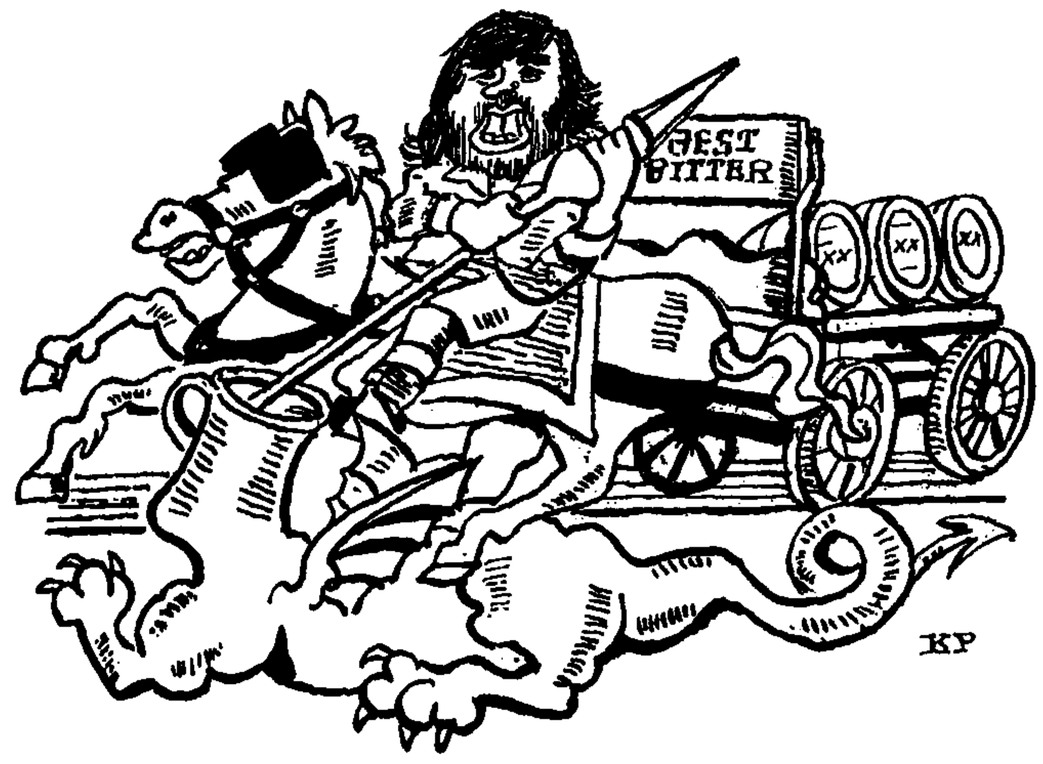
And I'm proud of it! That takes real courage in my book! That's what I call heroism!

WHAT about broken marriages? It can happen to anyone! Of course it causes a lot of unhappiness, pain and misery.

But you don't just cry about it as if you were George Best! No, you dust yourself down, pick someone up and ask them if they'd like your babies!

● ***Read DAVE BLUNKETT every week in the Sun, until next week when even his friend Rebekah realises he is no bloody good and sacks him.***

Lives Of The Saints



St George And The Flagon

ST GEORGE is England's best-loved saint, although he was originally born in Northern Ireland. In those times, George was a humble sportsmith who roamed the country kicking a ball around, to the great pleasure of the simple folk of Old Trafford.

Then one fatal day he encountered a large flagon.

"You will never defeat me," quoth the flagon.

"You're right there," said the brave Saint George, "but I'll die trying." He then swallowed the flagon in a single draught. But no sooner had he done so than another flagon appeared, even larger than the first.

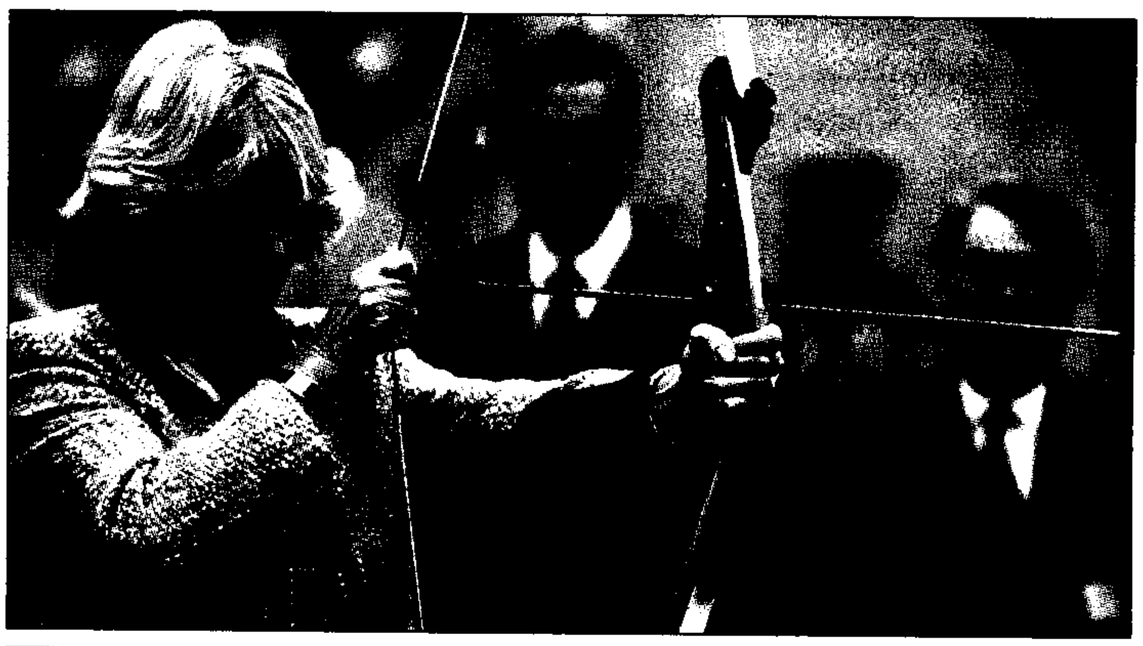
"Are you looking at me?" said the flagon. But George showed no fear as he despatched the second flagon. But alas, alack, yet another appeared. And another. And another.

The poor saint fell to his knees, humbly bewailing his fate. "Oh mighty flagon, I can beat various blonden damsels, but verily I cannot beat you".

And so it was that the great knight met his end and George was soon sanctified by his faithful followers and was taken up into the Sky Sports Round-Up.

DAILY EXPRESS

DIANA'S DEATH
The Proof At Last



Barbara Godwin and Daphne Carr were joint winners of the flower of the month competition and the monthly competition for 'something I found in my garden today' was won by Margaret Williams, with a stone,

Lymington Times

DIARY

THE REAL FATHER CHRISTMAS: A DAILY MAIL INVESTIGATION

It is sometimes said that an Englishman's home is his castle. But our investigations have revealed that, at this time of year, the truth is very different.

Later this month – on the stroke of midnight on the 24th of December – a portly, bearded, red-faced unmarried man with a shadowy past may be found lurking in and around the chimneys of ordinary, decent Britons.

First checking that all the adults are asleep – some say he carries hard drugs in hidden pockets to "help the process along" – he then creeps into the bedrooms of any under-age children in the house.

Surprisingly, perhaps, this overweight, flamboyantly-dressed confirmed bachelor with his trademark sack of toys, a sack he carries in order to – in a spokesman's chilling phrase – "amuse the kiddies", has never been denounced as a menacing threat by a senior Government spokesman.

He may style himself Christmas – "Father Christmas" in his slick publicity hand-outs. But our researches show he has no children of his own. There has even been talk of a grotto.

And his true origins are murky, even sinister.

So who is the REAL Father Christmas? To find an answer to this troubling question we must travel far back deep into his past – a past which, former friends confess, he has taken pains to conceal.

The man his fans have for so long taken for English was, in fact, born a German.

There is still no hard-and-fast proof that he was once a goose-stepping senior Nazi with a chain of war-crimes to his name who worked under direct command of Adolf Hitler himself. But the facts remain deeply – some would say wilfully – obscure.

We can now reveal that the man so many British children know simply as "Father Christmas" is nothing of the sort. His birth certificate tells a very different story.

His real name?

Santa Claus.

No one is suggesting that, being German, Claus represents a very real danger to innocent kiddies. Far from it. His highly-paid legal advisers continue to insist that this sherry-swilling former Nazi has the interests of children at heart.

But, behind closed doors, disturbing questions will not go away. Former friends and associates question the suitability of this sleigh-riding spendaholic German for high-profile work with children and tiny tots. They fear that many of them are too sleepy to ward off untoward approaches from a clinically obese stranger grooming them ``with the full range of the latest toys – and perhaps even a goodnight kiss.

So why is Santa Claus not ostracised by right-minded folk? Instead, he is feted up and down the country by the great and the good.

Regularly photographed in the company of all the top people, "Father Christmas" – as he unashamedly styles himself –has always been eager to be associated with the rich and the famous.

Little do they realise that his trademark bushy white beard is in fact entirely false. The revelation will send shock-waves around the world of gifts.

"It hooks around his ears. I once saw Claus detach it when he thought no-one was looking. Underneath, his chin is as clean-shaven as a baby's bottom," reveals one horrified former associate.

It certainly suits Claus's purposes to insinuate himself into the lives of the well-to-do. Friends say he protects his reputation with a human shield of the rich and famous.

Prime Minister Blair's troubled bulimic wife Cherie, for instance.

"Cherie counts Claus as a close friend and adviser," claims one deeply concerned friend of the family. "Every Christmas Eve, she even orders Tony to leave a glass of sherry, a mince pie and a lump of coal on the mantelpiece, just for Claus".

It's almost as though these random objects form a secret sign of a sinister pact between two of society's outsiders:

CHERIE – the insecure – some well-wishers worry that she may be clinically insane – wife of the discredited Prime Minister.

SANTA CLAUS – the morbidly obese chimney-creeper who admits to numbering elves among his underage workforce.

Others recall Claus demanding an orange be left out in secret drop-off points to satisfy his unconventional nocturnal yearnings.

"The orange" hints a distinguished criminal psychologist, "is a foreign fruit used by those who wish to indulge their appetites unashamedly. More upsettingly, these people rarely eat an orange without first *peeling it*."

Youthful associates recall the teenage Claus as something of a loner. "He kept himself to himself," says one. "But he always took a fanatic interest in children. Children and reindeers."

Claus's unusual fondness for these ungainly quadrupeds – he was once overheard calling them "deer" – was to develop into something of an obsession.

Former colleagues still wonder what he sees in them.

"A reindeer is certainly not my idea of a normal healthy heterosexual date," confesses a worried friend, who does not wish to be identified, no doubt out of deep-seated fear of repercussions.

"It might not be politically correct to say this," reveals a former business partner, "but reindeers have antlers. One of them – he insisted on being called "Rudolf" – had a very shiny nose. And – if you ever saw him – you would even say it glows."

All of the other reindeer used to laugh and call him names. They never let poor Rudolf play in any reindeer games. Then – one foggy Christmas eve – Santa came to say, "Rudolf with your nose so bright, won't you guide my sleigh tonight?"

Rudolf replied in the affirmative. Experts say it was to prove his downfall.

And – friends are now asking – how long will it be before Rudolf's publicity-mad puppet-master, Santa Claus, also falls to earth?

As told to

CRAIG BROWN

Celeb

LIGGER

I'M NOT EATING THESE, DAD... THEY LOOK DISGUSTING
FROGS LEGS AND SNAILS ARE DELICIOUS, PIXIE. TRY THEM.
DO I HAVE TO, DAD?
YES. IT'S IMPORTANT THAT YOU TRY ALL SORTS OF DIFFERENT FOODS...
BEING BROUGHT UP TO EAT WHATEVER'S PUT IN FRONT OF YOU WILL STAND YOU IN GOOD STEAD IN THE FUTURE.
IN A FEW YEARS' TIME YOU COULD BE ON "I'M A CELEBRITY GET ME OUT OF HERE."
THAT'S A POINT.
MUNCH
CHOMP

Literary Review

Gaul stones

The Possibility of an Island

Michel Houellebecq
(translated by Gavin Bowd)

(Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £12.99)

THE French writer Michel Houellebecq seems to get more respectful attention the more offensive and un-PC his books become. He has been hailed as the great white hope for what we had better call Gallic letters, and been compared to Sartre, Camus and the Marquis de Sade. All of which may not be saying much so far as English language readers are concerned -- and on the evidence of this book rather confirms the Anglo-Saxon suspicion that the Gauls are all *bouche* and no *boeuf*.

At any rate Houellebecq appears to court controversy and was once prosecuted in France for calling Islam "the stupidest religion". His earlier novel, *Platform*, which featured an Islamic attack on the decadent west, was by a happy coincidence published shortly before the 11 September attacks. Recent events in France have once again brought Islamophobia into the firelight, as it were, and some bits of Houellebecq's latest novel might be thought to fan the flames. Daniel, its narrator, is a stand-up comedian who specialises in obscene and racist entertainments with titles like "We Prefer the Palestinian Orgy Sluts" and "Munch on my Gaza Strip (my huge Jewish settler)".

We are repeatedly told that Daniel is brilliant and successful at what he does, that he is a cutting observer of contemporary reality and a hero of free speech; but we are given no evidence of his brilliance, only of his gratuitous offensiveness, and he himself seems far more interested in regaling us with the pornographic minutiae (or grosseries) of his sex life.

Daniel eventually gets bored of all this sex and success and falls in with a new age sci-fi cult called the Elohimites, who claim to have discovered the secret, via cloning and the transference of memory, to eternal life. Unfortunately, it is not eternal life as we might hope to know it: the neohumans of the future, one of whom is Daniel's 24th descendant (or reincarnation) seem to lead a dreary existence in hi-tech gated isolation, endlessly researching and recording the life stories of their human originals. From time to time humanoid savages, the descendants of our inevitably decadent civilisation, attempt to break in through the perimeter fences and must be electrocuted. Eventually some of the neohumans get bored and decide to break out.

Oh brave new world, one is tempted to remark, though in its depiction of the ultimate poverty of a life endlessly prolonged through scientific intervention (in that case, as I recall, the secretions of carp liver) it might be thought to owe a greater debt to another Huxley novel, *After Many a Summer*. Its division of human species into effete computer nerds and brutish savages also owes something to the Eloi and Morlocks of the distant future in HG Wells' *Time Machine*.

But Houellebecq lacks the imagination to write decent science fiction; and in fairness he does not even try. His descriptions of the changes in the earth's geography and ecosystem over the next millennium or two are cursory at best, merely decorative. His futuristic hominids may not need to eat food but they still send emails to each other on something anachronistically like our present internet. There is no rounded or consistent realisation of a future world.

Daniel (or Houellebecq) seems more interested in giving vent to his own contemptuous attitudes. "Like all very pretty girls she was basically only good for fucking", he says of his much younger girlfriend. As for love: "Living together alone is hell between consenting adults." Pondering his own mortality, he realises that "In the modern world you could be a swinger, bi, trans, zoo, into S&M, but it was forbidden to be *old*."

The idea that the old are redundant is a major theme, the whole point of eternal life being, of course, eternal youth, with all the sexual potency that goes with it. As in Houellebecq's previous novels, we are being told that our western materialist obsession with youth and sex is vain and ridiculous; that much is obvious; but why, this time, we needed to have that message wrapped up in an interminable cod sci-fi narrative about Daniel and his clones seems rather less obvious. As a story it is pretty risible and as a novel of ideas (which is what presumably it aims to be) it takes a great deal of space to say not very much. It is probably the worst book I have read all year.

FIRST DRAFTS
My heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains my sens'e-and that bloody bird's not helping things either
Pearsall
Keats

Books & Bookmen

■ WITH its grasp of suspense, the Office of Fair Trading should be writing thrillers. The day before it was due to announce whether it was referring the Waterstone's/HMV merger to the Competition Commission, it announced that it was delaying the moment by a week or so, leaving the whole book trade on tenterhooks.

The delay could be a good sign for the publishing lobby; an indication that its argument is prevailing, the deal will be referred and HMV's Christmas will be dampened severely. Alternatively, it might be that the OFT feels the need for a bit more soul-searching before it plumps for a decision that it knows will be wildly unpopular with everyone but the Brentford massive and Ottakar's shareholders.

Some are saying the deal will go through because the combined operation will still have less than a magic 25 percent of the market. Perhaps: but the key here is who has the other 75 percent. Online booksellers, for all Amazon's high profile, struggle to reach 10 percent, and the independents' share is dwindling slowly. Which leaves the supermarkets, who seem unchecked by any competition rules at all. An enlarged Waterstone's will almost certainly compete with them, diminishing choice all round. Get the black armbands and plumed horses ready.

■ PITY Lady Colin Campbell. In August, her novel *Empress Bianca* was injuncted, following suggestions by stinking rich widow Lily Safra that the book was based on her life and was defamatory. Publisher Arcadia was forced to withdraw and pulp all copies of the book, with the author and Arcadia md Gary Pulsifer claiming, hand on heart, that any resemblance to persons, living or otherwise, was coincidental.

Now comes the news that the book would have been a shoo-in for the *Literary Review*'s Bad Sex in Fiction award, but for the injunction and the fact that the judges actually found it arousing. Better luck next time, Lady Colin.

'Bookworm'

LIBRARY NEWS

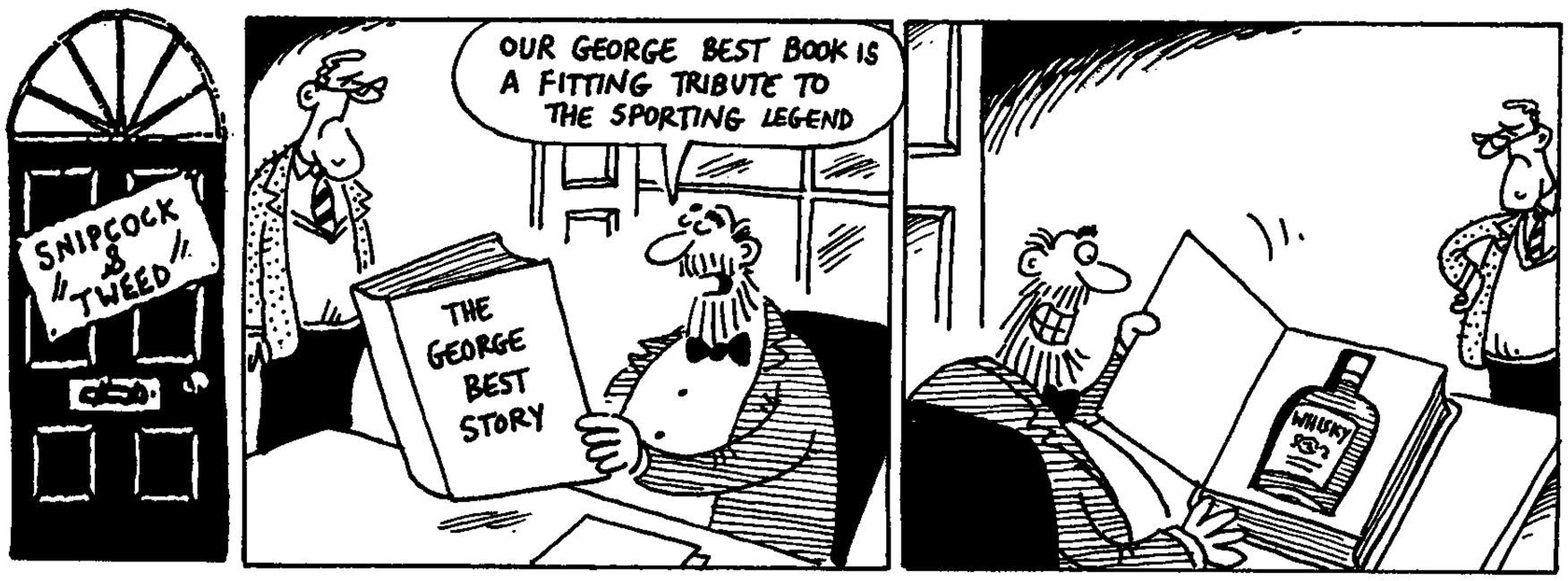
■ THE traditional hush of libraries may have been replaced by children's reading clubs and the clickety-clack of computer keyboards, but now anyone looking for a quiet place to read in Coventry will also have to contend with the raised voices of people complaining about council housing.

Coventry council plans to set up "one-stop-shops" for dealing with problems with any council services inside three of the city's branch libraries. Library staff fear that an influx of people angry about their housing benefit or rubbish collection will rather ruin the atmosphere. They also fear that they will be at risk, since staff dealing with complaints at the main city centre office work behind a glass screen and have a security guard.

JUST FANCY THAT!

"What counted... was not what he said or did, but the spirit, the ebullience, and the cunning determination that propelled this corrupt, courageous, and clever mass of idiosyncrasies to wealth and fame... I was naturally disappointed and shocked at the revelation that he had grossly abused his fiduciary position and misappropriated hundreds of millions of pounds... His talents as a huckster on a grand scale did not translate easily into orthodox administration... A shameless gadfly, poseur, fugitive, and confidence trickster, he tried to embezzle his way through his problems. He deferred the hour of reckoning by his leonine perseverance at mendacious bluster and outright theft..."

-- Conrad Black on Robert Maxwell, in his 1993 autobiography *'A Life In Progress'*



Across-the-pond life

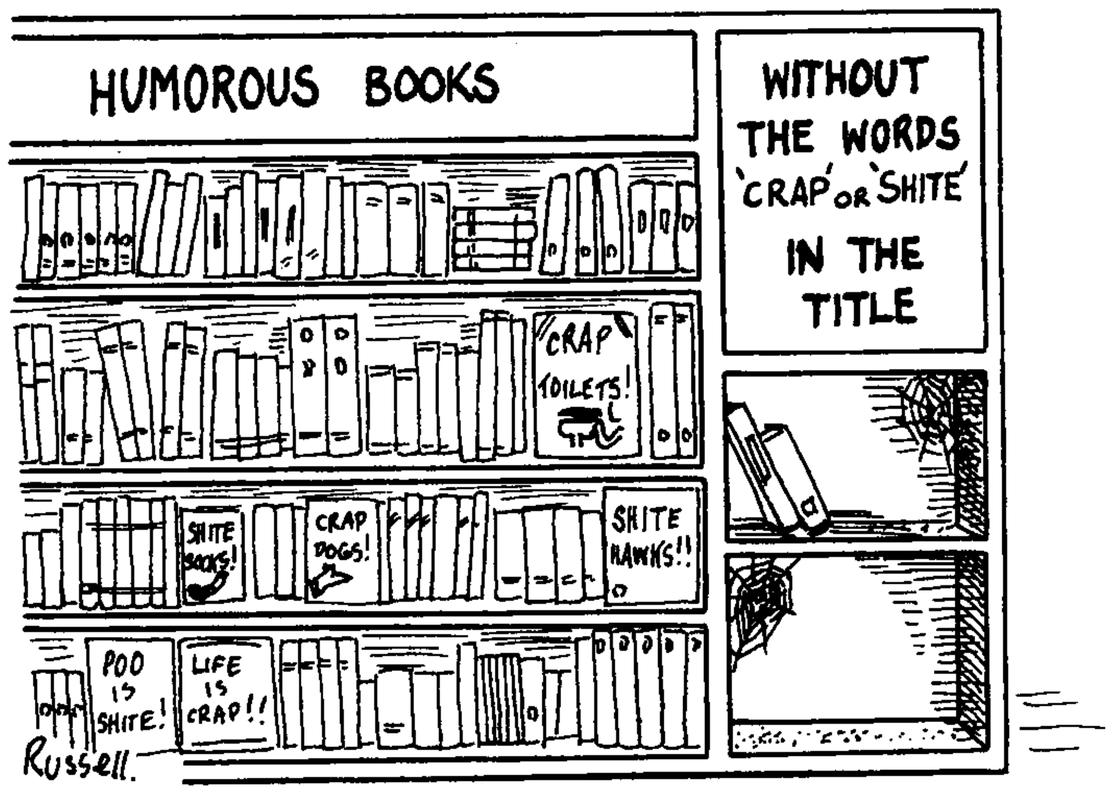
The Brooklyn Follies

Paul Auster

(Faber £16.99)

"I WAS looking for a quiet place to die," Paul Auster's new novel kicks off. "Someone recommended Brooklyn, and so the next morning I traveled [*sic*] down there from Westchester to scope out the terrain." Curiously enough, *The Brooklyn Follies* defies the grim promise of its opening paragraph to turn, eventually, into a rooty-tooty slice of contemporary Americana that, for all the surface wisecracking of its *yumour*, is as homespun as a slab of Old Ma Hominy's Pecan Pie.

Nathan Glass, Auster's late-fiftysomething master of ceremonies, lately operated on for lung cancer, assumes he has but a few months to live. Relocated to the Big Apple, on the other hand, and drinking in its warm if apprehensive communality (this is late 2000, buster, and no one, but no one, is voting for Dubya) Nat finds a hitherto crabbed existence – estranged wife, hacked off daughter – unexpectedly on the turn. Before you know it the guy's part of a cosy little circle that includes his nephew Tom (problems, flunked out of grad school etc), the latter's twinkly employer, a gay second-hand bookstore proprietor named Harry, and a jewellery designer called Nancy, known as, er, "Beautiful Perfect Mother", after whom Tom quietly lusts.



This is also, we quickly infer, a novel about family and all its manifold frets and obligations. Pretty soon Nat and Tom are busily engaged in dealing with nine-year-old Lucy, daughter of Tom's ex-porn queen sister Aurora who turns up out of nowhere and won't say why. Meanwhile philanthropic Harry canvasses the idea of founding something called the "Hotel Existence", a utopian community "with lots of land and enough buildings to accommodate all the people who want to live there". A trip to Maine, where it is proposed that Lucy can stay with her step-aunt, even produces a likely location in the shape of the Chowder Inn, not to mention feisty Honey Chowder, who offers an instant cure for Tom's loneliness.

Nat, in case you hadn't twigged, is a man transformed. When Harry drops dead from shock – the victim of a manuscript-forging scam involving a vengeful ex-squeeze – it's he who gets heavy with the fraudsters and sorts things out. Barely pausing for breath, he tracks Aurora down to North Carolina and rescues her from the clutches of a religious zealot husband, while presiding over Tom's new life as Harry's legatee and patching things up with his daughter. It then gets like a Victorian novel: Honey heads south to the big city to nail her man, while Aurora and Nancy are found to be a gay item, and Nat himself gets it maturely-yet-rhapsodically on with Nancy's ma. There's a bit at the end where it looks as if he's having a heart attack, but no I *won't* spoil it for you.

The title, by the way, gestures at "The Book of Human Folly", a side-project in which Nat looks to record "every inane act I had committed during my long and checkered career as a man". American novels of this kind very often give away their secret intentions by a reliance on favourite adjectives. One of Auster's, oddly enough, is "rambunctious".

Alas, no one in these 300 or so pages is in the least rambunctious. In contrast, they are all deadly dull. They go on long, unnecessarily sign-posted journeys that cross the Whitestone Bridge into the Bronx and continue north for several miles until they come to the I-95; they eat long, tenderly itemised dinners. Even Aurora's humiliation at the hands of the local preacher, Reverend Bob, has her dwelling at unreasonable length on his "porn-sized cock… stiff and purplish red, but the hard-on made it all veiny" etc, etc.

Nancy's ma having expressed certain, ah, *doubts* about the Nancy-Aurora tie-up, Nat counsels non-intervention and weighs in with an awesomely risible harangue: "Try to roll with the punches. Keep your chin up… Vote Democrat every election… Drink eight glasses of water a day… Breathe deeply. Keep your eyes open… Remember how much I love you."

British critics habitually turn completely goofy in the presence of this sort of thing, and yet its final effect is to make one appreciate the oft-maligned efforts of local talent. I mean, compared to *The Brooklyn Follies*, Ian McEwan is actually quite good.

Pseuds Corner

Not since Shakespeare wrote about kings and princes has one man promised to do so much for his country.

DAVID WALSH on Wayne Rooney,
Sunday Times

It sounds simple but, when Mancunians talk of the great conductors who worked in the city, those who enjoy both football and music might be tempted to link [Roy] Keane's name with that of Barbirolli.

PATRICK BARCLAY,
Daily Telegraph

'You are the most gifted nuisance I know' the veteran writer and journalist Edward Pierce told me. It was a compliment I shall treasure…New Labour, multi-cultchi Tories, the Monarchy, Zionists, Muslim apologists, British nationalists, Black and Asian appeasers, have all described me as the "enemy within"…Add to these the Friends of the USA, who also want people like me, or Robert Fisk, or Mark Steel first tortured then dead, the Russians who warned me off after my piece on their treatment of Chechens, the Hindu fundamentalists who want me never to set foot in India, and you begin to understand the chaos of the twenty-first century.

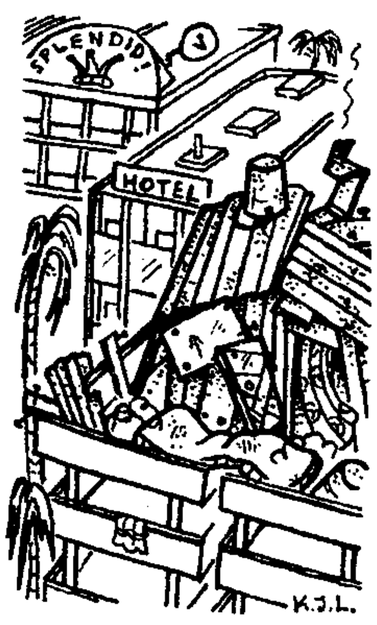
YASMIN ALIBHAI-BROWN, in Free Expression is No Offence, ed. Lisa Appignanesi (Penguin, 2005)

"Y'all Niggaz Better Recognize": Hip Hop's Dialectical Struggle for Recognition

Essay contributed by JOHN P. PITTMAN to the collection Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason, edited by Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby, volume 16 of the Popular Culture and Philosophy Series

We are planning to go to Gran Canaria in January and want to rent somewhere primitive to give the children a taste of life without electricity and running water. Where can I find such a place?

Letter to *Guardian* travel section



Motorway as site of performance: space is a practiced place

The main outcomes of this PhD project in the domain of Performance Studies comprise an originally-devised, site-specific performance centred on Whalley and Miller renewing their wedding vows (50%) and a complementary written thesis (50%). The one-off performance took place at Roadchef Sandbach Services on the M6 Motorway on 20 September 02…Whalley and Miller's overall conceptual framework includes an exploration of Bakhtin's 'dialogism' and 'heteroglossia' besides other poststructuralist theorists who work with the language games, speech gestures and the multi-accentuality of sign. Their project resists, however, outright capitulation to postmodern differance. In inter-related ways, the performance and the complementary writing explore and qualify key concepts of 'Auge' ('place' and 'non-place') and Schechner ('as/is' performance') positing a 'both-and' performativity which embraces the anthropological space of motorway services and the sincerity of 'speech acts' (J.L.Austin) in the instance of the wedding vow renewal.

PhD thesis submitted by J. Whalley and L. Miller to Manchester Metropolitan University, found on the Index to Theses website

"We both got sucked into the French existentialist vortex. We both decided we were against the war, and we both smoked Gauloises and wore berets, and we were against everything. No, it's about the universe conspiring. With the last album I was in a very thoughtful mood, a very angry mood, a mood to be political, very upset with George Bush…"

Madonna on working with Mirwais, producer of her last album
Observer Music Monthly.

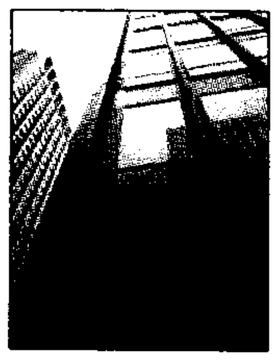
CONTRIBUTORS: Henry Miller, Eugene Weber, Adil Hemming-Khan, M.A. Wagner, David Podmore, David E. Roberts, Andy Long.

£10 paid for all entries

IN THE BACK

NUCLEAR NEWS

Kiss and Bechtel



AMONG the many corporations lined up to cash in on the carve up of British Nuclear Fuels (BNFL) and the sell-off of its decommissioning arm, British Nuclear Group (BNG), is US engineering giant Bechtel.

The firm's nuclear expertise has been put to good use already with a contract to advise on the dismantling of BNFL, an arrangement that has run from 2002 and so far netted Bechtel £23m. But even "new" Labour could see it might look a bit off if the firm profited from its own work, so last year the then Trade Secretary Patricia Hewitt stipulated that "we must ensure that there is no conflict of interests and that business ethics are fully observed. Therefore I am also pleased to announce that we have agreed with Bechtel that they will not bid for nuclear site management contracts for an additional two years, until June 2008".

The two-year gap judged to be a seemly interval to remove any conflicts of interest may appear a long time compared to, say, the five minutes it usually takes departing cabinet ministers to take up other offers – but crucially it only covers "management" of sites. Bechtel will still be able to bid for work as a sub-contractor or even buy BNG when it eventually comes up for sale – both lucrative openings made possible in no small part by Bechtel's expert, and expensive, consultancy.

Jobs for the girl

MORE work for one of the prolific multi-taskers running Britain's nuclear industry as Lady Barbara Thomas Judge (pictured), chairman of the UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA), joins the board of PA Consulting.

The consultancy's main experience in the British nuclear business came several years ago when it recommended to the Department of Trade and Industry a new MOX (mixed oxide) fuel plant at Sellafield as a profitable sideline for British Nuclear Fuels. As opponents predicted, it has ended up losing money while being dogged by controversy.

Never mind, PA Consulting can be confident this won't harm its chances of winning further work in what looks like an increasingly nuclear future. Its well-connected new director made her support for more nuclear development clear to the *Sunday Times* the week before last. And not only does Lady Judge chair UKAEA, she also sits on the strategy and energy boards of the DTI – the government department responsible for the future of nuclear energy.

UKAEA told the *Eye* that the PA job presents no conflict of interest and that she took it to replace the position at Capital Radio that she recently gave up. Her talents clearly require at least the five company board positions the *Eye* could find (UKAEA couldn't produce a full list) – not to mention her half dozen roles on boards of public bodies.

PS: Among its many other interests, PA Consulting is leading the development of ID cards and has already earned tens of millions from the Home Office for work on the scheme. The firm can now be more relaxed about legal qualms over the controversial cards. Lady Judge manages to squeeze a non-executive directorship of the Department for Constitutional Affairs into her busy life too.

INFORMANTS

Strange Customs

THREE years ago the collapse of a trial in Liverpool exposed how Customs & Excise had covered up the status of its key witness in 40 duty fraud trials that resulted in more than 100 convictions, almost all of them since overturned at enormous cost to the taxpayer (see *Eye* 1117).

Now an even greater contempt for the judicial process has emerged: not only did Customs fail to disclose that its witness was an informant, it also continued to put him before the courts knowing he was not a "witness of truth".

Alfred Allington was managing director of London City Bond (LCB), a bonded warehouse in the East End from which frauds costing billions of pounds in excise duty were run by men claiming that they were transferring imports (mainly booze) to other bonded warehouses duty-free when they were in fact selling them on the black market.

Customs let the scam run for years, haemorrhaging public money, in the hope of securing some big prosecutions with the help of Allington who, by cooperating with investigators, became what's known in the trade as a "participating informant".

If such informants are used as witnesses, however, it's naturally important that defence lawyers and judges know about them. By concealing Allington's status for years, Customs achieved a series of convictions that were destined to fall apart as soon as his true role became known.

The *Eye* has now learnt that Scotland Yard is not only investigating this cover up; it is also looking at evidence suggesting a more serious deception by Customs. Papers disclosed in an appeal court hearing last year show that Customs continued to put Allington forward as a reliable witness even when it had intelligence backing up defence allegations that he was complicit in the frauds rather than a mere observer of them.

At a meeting attended by Customs' national head of commercial fraud, Paul Acda , in February 1998 to discuss an investigation in Scotland, it was decided not to use Allington as a witness because officers had intelligence suggesting he was receiving payments for his services from others involved in the fraud. In other words, there were strong reasons to believe he was corrupt.

Despite doubts over Allington, he continued to be used as a witness in England for another couple of years, while the intelligence indicating that he was in on the frauds all along and was therefore totally unsuitable for the witness stand was kept from the courts. Customs' suspicions about him only emerged last year when one of the many convictions based on his evidence was overturned. "Alfred Allington should never have been called as a witness relied on by the prosecution," lamented the judge.

Around 20 Customs officials are under investigation by the Met police over their roles in the LCB prosecutions, as are former director-general Terry Byrne and head in-house lawyer David Pickup over the way they responded to an inquiry into the fiasco by Mr Justice Butterfield.

If he hasn't already, Knacker of the Yard may also want to ask Paul Acda, who left to run the UN-controlled Kosovo Customs service in 2000, just who allowed Allington to be used as a witness even when Customs had intelligence suggesting he was bent.

REBUILDING IRAQ

I'm oil right, Jack

GOOD to see that Britain is doing its bit to "assist" Iraq – and help private western oil companies bolster their already massive profits at the same time.

As is well known, the United States is putting pressure on Iraq's fragile government to accept "production sharing agreements", or PSAs, to develop the Iraqi oil fields. These PSAs, previously unknown in the big middle eastern oilfields, will mean vast profits for western oil giants. Indeed, according to a report from the campaign group Platform, War on Want and the New Economics Foundation, western companies could make returns on investment of between 42 percent and 162 percent, while Iraq itself could lose some $100bn by agreeing to the PSAs.

While the pressure from the US for PSAs is well known, it now emerges that Britain's own Foreign Office is equally involved in lobbying the Iraqis. It is doing so through a little known but powerful business group called the International Tax and Investment Centre (ITIC). Originally formed to help business get the right laws to "encourage" investment in the former Soviet Union, ITIC is now central to the oil industry's efforts in Iraq. An Anglo-American outfit jointly chaired by a senior US businessman and the former Tory trade minister Lord Walker, it is funded by the likes of BP, Shell and Exxon.

ITIC began its "Iraq project" in July 2003 and claims it did so "following several requests from advisors from western governments and international organizations for private sector input as they prepare their technical assistance programs for Iraq". Among those keen to hear ITIC's advice were the World Bank and the British government.

Iraqi ministers were presented with an ITIC report recommending that their oil industry enter into PSAs with western firms at meetings organized by the IMF and World Bank in Beirut earlier this year. At the same time ITIC reported a "meeting held with UK Treasury and Foreign Office to discuss coordination and cooperation of Full Report presentation". In other words, two British government departments became agents for ITIC, helping it persuade the Iraqis to accept PSAs.

The Foreign Office denies it has been involved in specific lobbying on Iraqi oil; but documents released to Platform under the Freedom of Information Act show the true extent to which the British government has represented ITIC. The Foreign Office presented Iraqi oil ministers with a "code of practice for the Iraqi oil industry" last autumn. This code was supposed to persuade the oil ministers they needed to have open, transparent deals to avoid corruption. However, the FO documents quoted extensively from ITIC's own Iraq report – before it was published and without acknowledging that the report was itself funded by western oil firms.

ITIC's Daniel Witt with Iraqi finance minister Azez Hassan in Beirut

The FO document also goes beyond its brief and says that "Iraq would need to engage with the international oil companies to provide appropriate levels of foreign direct investment" to develop its oil. Other solutions that do not hand such profits to western oil firms – like borrowing money and directing its own oil exploitation – are for some reason not discussed.

In addition the British government has, via the Foreign Office, paid £147,700 to fund advisers to the Iraqi oil ministry, including two BP executives, Terry Adams and Bob Morgan.

CRIMINAL CASE REVIEWS

Homing instinct

MORE on Susan May (pictured), who everyone (except the criminal justice system) believes was wrongfully convicted of murdering her elderly aunt 13 years ago.

Just as the Labour MP Michael Meacher, supported by more than 100 parliamentary colleagues, raised the continuing delay in righting the injustice that befell Mrs May, it emerged that she is now facing the loss of her family home. A solicitor who once acted briefly (but ineffectively) for her is threatening to put a charge on her house for an unpaid bill of £2,800, run up while she was in jail.

Mrs May, who lost two appeals, is awaiting a second review of her case by the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC). She hopes that the new evidence outlined in the Commons by Mr Meacher, including the discrediting of the three forensic experts who gave evidence and the non-disclosure of the existence of a more plausible suspect, may finally clear her name.

After her conviction in 1992, and following a critical report from the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors (OSS), it was decided as part of the campaign to clear her name that Mrs May should take action for negligence against her original solicitor, Michael Cheetham, who had not called any defence witnesses.

Originally the action was being run on a pro bono basis by an OSS solicitor, but when it looked likely he would become a witness in Mrs May's appeal, the case was handed to Ian Brown of Manchester solicitors Lomax Geddes, and Mrs May assumed he was still acting pro-bono. But Mr Brown served the county court summons on Mr Cheetham out of time and the case was struck out at Oldham County Court. Mr Brown then billed Mrs May for his costs. She contested the bill and eventually, in Stoke County Court, the judge accepted that she believed he was acting pro bono and drew up a compromise by slashing the bill in half. But from jail, Mrs May was unable to meet it and Mr Brown obtained a charge on her house in Royton, Oldham.

Mrs May, 61, has an income of just £68 a week old age pension and £15 a week from another family property she rents out to a 92-year-old woman whom she would never dream of evicting. After the last court hearing she began to pay Brown £10 a month towards the debt – which he has been accepting. But he has now written to her saying he is not prepared to "wait 24 years for the payment".

In an attempt to head off his threatened order for sale on her home, Mrs May has now asked Mr Brown how much he would be prepared to accept each month. The *Eye* asked him the same question. But reply came there none.

FORENSICS

Taking the PPP

AT THE beginning of the year police and scientists were celebrating Home Secretary Charles Clarke's decision not to flog the Forensic Science Service (FSS) to the private sector under a planned public private partnership scheme (*Eye*1125) The announcement that it was to stay in the public sector (pending a review in two years' time) allayed fears that vital evidence would be lost if the service became driven by profit.

Thus reassured, scientists' union Prospect and police forces said no more about the risk that decisions over expensive tests that might solve a crime or establish a suspect's innocence would be made on the basis of cost rather than justice.

This month the FSS – which currently controls about 85 percent of the UK's £170m market in forensic science – is due to become a wholly-owned government company, or "GovCo". As such, it will have to compete against other providers as a commercial provider of forensic advice and expertise, with the Home Office putting work out to tender at the market rate. It was a compromise accepted by many of the opponents of the PPP deal, as it would at least preserve the impartiality of the FSS itself.

But what's this? The newly published Home Office Science and Innovation Strategy reveals that the department's thinking has not shifted one jot since the privatisation was proposed in 2003, noting that while "no irrevocable decision" about the future of the FSS will be made until December 2006: "This timeline allows the GovCo the opportunity to succeed in its own right before moving to PPP."

STANSTED EXPANSION

Fly in the ointment

GREAT timing by the auditors who dished out the internationally recognised ISO14001 for environmental management to BAA at Stansted.

The award, for organisations that have reduced their environmental impact and managed environmental risk, was given in November by the Environmental Resources Management consultancy after the airports programme to "raise awareness of the surrounding environment".

This month BAA is due to start the planning process for its second runway at Stansted, with the launch of a public consultation that was ordered by the High Court earlier this year, following the judicial review of the air transport white paper. BAA hopes to open the new runway in 2013.

The damage that the proposed new runway will do to that surrounding environment is immense. English Heritage says it will cause the "direct loss of three square miles of historic Essex", including 30 listed buildings and two important ancient monuments, as well as having a huge impact on the surrounding historic towns and villages.

The Woodland Trust points to the loss of six ancient woods, totalling 212 acres, including one site of special scientific interest. The nearby local authorities, including Essex County Council, are worried about increasing noise and say there will be problems with overcrowded local roads, public transport and parking if the expansion goes ahead.

And all this *before* the environmental cost of aviation fuel carbon emissions is even considered. Just imagine the damage the BAA could do if it weren't award-winningly environmentally friendly.

DEEPCUT DEATHS

The farce be with you

THE suggestion last week that the report on the Royal Marines unit where men were forced to fight naked, with one apparently being kicked unconscious, would be made public was met with scorn by those trying to lift the veil of secrecy over the Deepcut affair.

Typically, the latest full police report into the deaths of four army recruits at the Surrey barracks was suppressed and only a six-page executive summary was made public. This has simply added to the stench hanging over the army and the Surrey police who investigated how the four soldiers died.

The report was compiled by Devon and Cornwall police, the force that was called in to review the work of colleagues in Surrey. It shows that the 2003-4 Surrey police re-investigation of the four gunshot deaths – only instigated after a public outcry – was muddled, divided and in important respects wrong-headed. Surrey's top brass could not keep their hands off the case, repeatedly interfering and overruling decisions by the senior detectives who were supposed to be leading the fieldwork. So persistent was the meddling, in fact, that Devon and Cornwall was unable to establish who was really in charge of the process. Worse, there was no auditable decision-making process: in other words, no clear paper record to show who decided what, when or why.

Perhaps most shocking of all is that when a written and dated set of "initial strategic aims" was found, senior Surrey officers denied any knowledge of it. Indeed the Devon and Cornwall team was never even able to prove the document was not a fake.

This is shocking for two reasons. First, the mindset of the detectives is central to the concerns of the families, who suspect that officers assumed all along that the deaths were suicides. Second, if written "aims" are supposed to be the basis on which the officers act, what were the aims the officers were so anxious to disown? Like so many key questions in this case, the families, and the public, are not allowed to know the answers.

The meddling senior figures – "key people directing and controlling the re-investigation" – decided at an early stage that they wanted a broad examination of the causes of suicide in the army. When senior investigating officers objected to this, they were overruled, even though this had the effect of reducing the focus of the investigation. This investigative shift towards suicide, identified by the Devon and Cornwall summary, was so grave it meant that basic, normal guidelines for investigating violent deaths set out in detail in the police *Murder Investigation Manual* may not have been followed.

Although these criticisms are easy to miss in the arcane and apologetic language of the Devon and Cornwall summary, they raise more questions than they answer and undermine any case for keeping the full report secret. But Surrey police have "ownership" of the full Devon and Cornwall report and have decided it is not in the public interest to release it.

Even the six-page summary casts serious doubt on the judgement of the Prime Minister, however. He went out of his way in the Commons last May to praise Surrey's detective work. "We are grateful to the chief constable of Surrey," said Tony Blair. "There has been a very detailed police investigation of the deaths, with about 900 witnesses being interviewed and 1,500 statements taken over 15 months." The report on that investigation hasn't been published either.

TAX CREDITS FIASCO

EDS you lose

THE £71m (tax-relievable at 30 percent, so really costing £50m) compensation that EDS, the *Eye's* favourite IT firm, has agreed to pay HM Revenue and Customs as compensation for its part in the tax credits scandal is, according to the Revenue, "commensurate with EDS's responsibility for the IT problems which followed the launch of tax credits".

The cost is further mitigated by the fact that only an unspecified amount will be paid up front while the rest will be coughed up "over time". Exactly how much is to be paid and when remains "confidential".

As the Revenue was rumoured to be after several hundreds of millions, nearer to the true cost of the scandal, the settlement suggests that it may have accepted some responsibility. Yet in a letter to parliamentary select committee chairmen, quietly lodged in the House of Lords library, HMRC chairman David Varney (pictured) insisted that "EDS has agreed to pay a significant sum and has acknowledged responsibility for the IT problems that arose". In other words, it was their fault – in which case, why such a paltry settlement? Could it be because, with the government desperate to prevent the episode being exposed in the courts, EDS had by far the stronger bargaining position?

Should parliament want to probe, Varney is ready to resist. His letter goes on: "The terms of the agreement include a significant confidentiality requirement. It will therefore be important for us to think carefully about how to provide any further information you may need in a way that does not involve HMRC breaching our obligations under the agreement."

Last year the National Audit Office, qualifying its 2003/04 report on the Revenue's accounts, declined to look at that year's disastrous tax credits launch. NAO head Sir John Bourn said: "The department and EDS told me that a structured process of confidential discussions on these matters was continuing as I concluded this report. In order not to prejudice these discussions I have not examined these matters further."

With no discussions to prejudice any longer, will the NAO now try to get to the bottom of the fiasco? Or will HMRC give the auditors the same "confidentiality" brush off, ensuring that a quiet pay-off replaces democratic scrutiny of one of the biggest government cock-ups of recent times?

PRIVATE EQUITY

Drakes' progress

THE woeful performance of private law enforcement firms has been exposed once again in a Norwich courtroom.

The *Eastern Daily Press* recently reported how the firm paid to enforce arrest warrants on people failing to serve community punishment orders managed to catch only 31 out of 260 offenders over the summer, while its success rate before then wasn't much better.

The company responsible, Drakes ("total civil enforcement and debt recovery solutions"), is one of a breed of companies operating in the criminal justice system that are part of the secretive and avaricious private equity industry. It is part of the Bridgman group that says that it is owned by funds managed by an outfit called Gresham, including the mysterious South Place Zurich Partnership 2002, none of which supply accounts.

Bridgman gets nearly all its funding in the form of loans totalling £10m from anonymous creditors at inflated interest rates, a standard feature of the private equity industry that allows financiers to strip out profits asap and often leads to the kind of cost-cutting that makes chasing offenders look distinctly uneconomical.

Gresham is unabashed about its approach, boasting of its "strategy for exit to deliver maximum value to all investors". So the uncooperative small-time crooks of East Anglia might soon be somebody else's problem, but not before the private equity funds have got away with a few quid.

TAX-DODGING

Haven sent

FRESH from its record fine for serial tax fraud in the US and facing increasing hostility to tax avoidance over here, KPMG is leading Britain's beancounters in the effort to appear responsible.

Giving the Institute of Chartered Accountants' annual lecture last month, KPMG's head of tax Loughlin Hickey made an emotional appeal for trust between his profession and tax authorities.

But challenged by Richard Murphy of the Tax Justice Network to engender some of it by shutting down his firm's tax haven operations, Hickey could only splutter: "I am proud that KPMG is in those territories [eg Caymans, Bermuda]... quite frankly if principled firms like ourselves are not in these territories we don't aid them."

He was too modest to mention his firm's huge fees from inventing tax haven scams such as the VAT dodge using Jersey companies that was exposed in court last year. Even KPMG, under Hickey's "principled" leadership, acknowledged that the scheme would be viewed as "unacceptable tax avoidance" – but flogged it anyway.

HAEMOPHILIA

Blood money

SOME of the country's 5,000 haemophiliacs who contracted HIV and other deadly viruses from tainted blood products have learned that the blood – and with it their death sentences – came from high-risk drug-using inmates in American jails.

Carol Grayson, whose husband Peter Longstaff was infected with HIV, hepatitis and in recent years was also given blood products containing vCJD, has had it confirmed by lawyers involved in an action against blood companies in the US, that Peter received doses from inmates in a jail in Arkansas. One batch of plasma came from a donor subsequently found to be HIV positive.

This only confirmed what she and Peter had long suspected. Their campaign and investigation into Britain's tainted blood scandal had already unearthed evidence of cover-ups and ignored warnings.

Sadly, Peter will not learn the outcome of his legal action against American blood companies. He died last April, aged 47, of liver failure. *Eye* readers may recall the case of Peter Longstaff who was also one of those haemophiliacs who went on treatment strike in protest at the British government's refusal to give him and fellow sufferers synthetic blood products – even after they had been given blood infected with CJD.

Successive health ministers, both Tory and Labour, have always denied that patients were put at such risk. Only last year in a letter to Lord Morris – who had taken up the battle on behalf of Haemophilia Action, set up by Ms Grayson – Melanie Johnson, then Minister for Public Health, was still in denial, saying controls ensured that donations came from volunteers. "Although it has occasionally been suggested, the donor population does not include any jail inmate," she said, adding that the "National Blood Service had confirmed that Bio Products which made the blood products had never used plasma from US prisoners". This conveniently ignored the fact that the UK government was importing contaminated plasma products direct from US companies, who used paid donors.

Contaminated blood and clotting factors were given to thousands of people right up until 1985, when heat treatment introduced to combat HIV also by chance eradicated hepatitis C. About 5,000 haemophiliacs and many more patients given blood transfusions for accident or surgery, were infected. About 1,200 also contracted HIV, most of whom have since died.

Ministers have always refused a public inquiry into the scandal and tried to buy off protest with the promise of "compassion" money for those with hepatitis C, on top of payments to those who contracted HIV and Aids. They also promised a "review" after documents unearthed by campaigners showed that health service officials and doctors were aware of the risks of what was then identified as "non A, non B hepatitis" in "suspect" American batches since the early 1970s. Yet still they bought it in and gave it to unsuspecting haemophiliacs. Back in 1978 a leading UK haemophilia expert advised that it would be safer to give a synthetic clotting agent – something that has only been made available for all in the last two years.

FOLLOW-UPS... FOLLOW-UPS... FOLLOW-UPS... FOLLOW-UPS...

■ **AMIR HASSAN:** Good news – for the time being - for the Iranian journalist (see last *Eye*) who but for the 11th hour intervention of MP Celia Barlow and campaigners, would have been sent back to Iran where he was beaten and threatened for running the country's first private internet company and web service.

Amir Hassan is now free from detention and back with friends and supporters in Brighton. Ms Barlow has raised his plight in the Commons and made a formal complaint about the way immigration officials mishandled his case and misled her about his status and whereabouts. She was assured his case would now be brought to the direct attention of the Home Secretary and was formally under review.

Not so good news, however, about Fahad Ahmed, the 16-year-old who was left behind when is mother, brother and sister were seized from their home in a dawn raid and deported back to Pakistan (see last *Eye*). Four weeks on, his friends and neighbours have still not seen or heard of him and fear for his safety.

■ **PROPERTY:** it's been a great year for Countryside Properties.

There was its obfuscation over asbestos contamination in Rochdale and unexploded bombs at a development in Hackney; the flats in Greenwich that amplified the noise made by upstairs neighbours; and of course there was the collapse of its planned development on National Trust land at Cliveden (*Eyes during 2005*).

But never mind all that. The *Daily Telegraph*-sponsored What House? Awards have named the company Housebuilder of the Year 2005. Trebles all round!

In the City

AS IF the would-be "Lord" Barry Townsley didn't have enough problems with ensuring his bought and paid for (with political donations and support for favoured causes) Blairite peerage is delivered – because of an earlier "disgraceful" verdict for "gross misconduct" delivered by the Stock Exchange – he now finds himself embroiled in a major fraud investigation.

"The Butler", as Barry is known among those not his closest friends ("because he is always opening doors"), was closely involved in the 2003 flotation of Crown Corporation, now called Langbar International, whose AIM listing has been halted and an investigation begun by the Serious Farce Office. At issue are the probable non-existence of all the company's supposed assets: £365m in Brazilian bank deposits.

Crown was floated in October 2003 with Insinger Townsley (IT) as its broker. Furthermore, so close was IT chairman Townsley to those then running Crown that in April 2004 it was announced by chairman Mariusz Rybak that he was to be vice chairman of a new subsidiary, Crown Oil Corporation, which was supposed to be about to close the takeover of an offshore company owning Russian oil rights for £157m. Like much of what Crown claimed, the deal never happened.

Townsley left the Dutch bank Insinger de Beaufort which had bought his stockbroking firm in July 2004. Four months later IT quit as broker to Crown after a row with Rybak, reportedly over his plans for a management fee on top of his £100,000-plus salary.

Rybak in turn left Crown in June 2005 after which the scam began to unravel – but not before he and other insiders had unloaded millions of shares on unwitting institutional and private investors at prices north of 48p in the weeks leading up to the October suspension. With the SFO and the Fundamentally Supine Authority now on the case, everyone is denying any wrongdoing and blaming everyone else.

Questions are certain to be asked about the extent of the due diligence carried out by Insinger Townsley and other advisers into Crown and Rybak. The Monaco-based, Polish-born Canadian businessman had busted out once before in Canada with Intelligent Detection Systems (no joke!) IDS, which was supposed to detect bombs, was floated in Toronto in 1997 on the basis of a contract with the US Federal Aviation Authority. The stock soared and the company became worth almost £100m. By 2001 the company had collapsed and Rybak was gone having achieved pariah status, according to the *Ottawa Citizen*.

Other questions are also raised by the Insinger Townsley flotation and its subsequent role. Crown claimed to have raised £150m from European investors. Who were they – other than the ever-present Lambert Financial Investments who paid for a 60 percent stake in dubious Brazilian paper? And what has happened to the money, if there was any real money? The only deal that was done was with Lambert, the source of the £150m. And why was it that all the deals seemed to emanate from its major shareholder, Lambert? And who were Lambert's supposed 2,000 never-identified investors?

The Crown scandal is unlikely to do anything to improve Townsley's status before the House of Lords appointments committee, headed by Lord "hairdressers need not apply" Stevenson. Whispers from within the committee have suggested some of the six members have concerns about Townsley and some other nominations.

The close association and involvement of Townsley with a company now under investigation by the SFO and the FSA could be difficult for the appointments committee to ignore. Especially in the wake of the revelations (first made in *Eye* 1144) of the Stock Exchange's 1982 disciplinary action against Townsley for his role in enabling the Galloping Major Trevor Dawson to effectively steal £350,000 from investors in Arbuthnot Latham (AL) unit trusts. Fund manager Dawson was allowed by Townsley and his partner to deal ahead of the funds booking the winners to his personal account and subsequently realising that profit by selling on to the AL funds.

Townsley was considered lucky to escape with only a six-month ban from the trading floor of the Stock Exchange. The police investigation died with Dawson's suicide in 1983. Some suggest that a possible reason for the lenient treatment by the Stock Exchange (after all, Townsley had not only knowingly facilitated the theft of Dawson's profits from the unit trusts but had profited personally from the commissions earned on Dawson's dealings) was his family link to Sir Leonard, now Lord, Wolfson from the GUS dynasty. Townsley had formed his own firm, Jacobson Townsley, after going into the son-in-law business by marrying one of Wolfson's three daughters.

Like the Wolfsons, Townsley is close to Israel and its lobbyists such as the Dear Leader's tennis playing friend and chief party fundraiser, Lord Levy.

Intriguingly the major investors in Crown are said to be wealthy Israelis or Jewish investors in South America and Europe whose money is managed by Lambert – a Bermuda company managed from Barcelona by a former adviser to the Israeli government, Avi Arad.

The suspected fraud at Crown/Langbar centres on that initial investment in Crown and some $633m of construction and civil engineering contracts in Buenos Aires which were reportedly found by Lambert, passed to Crown and later bought by Lambert. Lambert paid for its 60 percent share stake in Crown with a certificate of deposit at the Banco do Brasil supposedly worth $275m. Lambert then bought the contracts, now totalling $700m, back from Crown in June 2004 (just before work was due to begin?) Lambert paid this time with a $350m promissory note, also issued by the Brazilian bank. This note was said to have matured in 2005. The resulting Brazilian bank deposits now totalling $661m were supposedly due to be repaid in 2009. These may have been held at a branch of the Brazilian bank in Argentina.

After Rybak left, the new chairman, accountant Stuart Pearson, announced that he had managed to transfer $294m to the Dutch bank ABN Amro. It now appears that much if not all of the documentation related to those deposits to be transferred to Holland was bogus. ABN Amro could find no cash which raises serious doubts about the balance of the $661m.

Brazil has fearsome exchange control regulations. Obtaining permission for money, especially big money, to be exported is difficult if not impossible. Many banks, including UK banks, have substantial funds blocked in Brazil from previous transactions. The only way to remit the funds is either by way of illegal transactions using offshore havens (not unknown) or by paying for assets in Brazil with the blocked funds. Both can involve big discounts, especially the illegal route. Crown never did either.

The movement of the Argentine contracts and the Brazilian deposits into and out of Crown suggests that they were like the wartime tins of sardines whose price went ever skywards – designed for buying and selling but not opening. Any attempt to cash the £365m in Banco do Brasil as distinct from using it to prop up the Crown balance sheet and share price was certain to expose the truth.

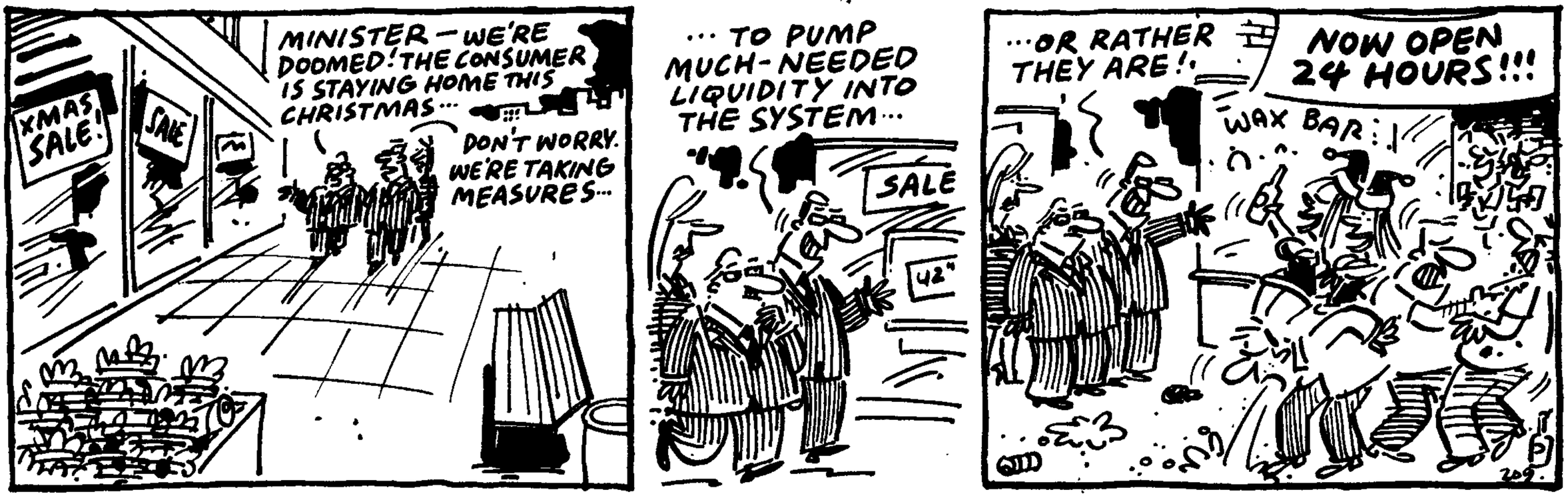
Floated at 350p the shares quickly hit 875p in December 2003 on news of the contracts. Crown was now one of the biggest capitalised AIM-listed companies. But doubts soon crept in and by this year the price had collapsed to 11p before rallying to 120p on Pearson's claim to have transferred part of the funds to ABN Amro. The price was still 50p at the suspension, valuing Langbar at just under £100m.

The Crown Corporation scandal is not just embarrassing for Barry Townsley and his hopes of a peerage. All the UK advisers have questions to be asked about how they failed to spot the con or to blow the whistle. Auditor Baker Tilly reportedly quit over its concerns and declined to sign the 2004 accounts but blew no public whistles. Law firm Lawrence Graham was also supposedly happy with the bank deposits. So too were nominated advisers Nabarro Wells who

Continued over ☛

THE DIRECTORS

DREDGE & RIGG



Stock Horror

by 'Bruin'

Sacks of coal for 2005

Value of £100 invested a year ago in...

...Patientline	£29
...Gresham Computing	£22
...Goshawk Insurance	£17
...Planestation	£13
...Sanctuary	£8
...The rest of the stock market	£116

replaced Insinger Townsley as brokers to the company in November 2004. Even more embarrassed is their successor, Arden Partners, who placed 9.1m new shares only in August at 48p raising £4.4m as well as placing a similar number of shares sold by Lambert. More unhappy than embarrassed are fund managers at Merrill Lynch, Gartmore, Henderson and the Universities Superannuation Fund who took the shares.

Rybak, his former Swiss partner Wolfgang Menzel (who quit for "health reasons": actually a row with Rybak in December 2003, eight days after the Argentine contracts were announced) and treasurer Jean-Pierre Regli as well as Arad all blame each other and all claim to be victims. As does the seemingly gullible Pearson.

But maybe those with most to answer are the City regulators – the FSA and the Stock Exchange who preside over the infamously loosely regulated AIM market. Especially when these companies were simply cash shells, as in the case of Crown, promising to find companies to takeover and justify their share prices. For regulators that was a triumph of hope over experience. Such "blind pools", as the Americans call them, have always been ripe for scams. Yet it was only this year that the FSA clamped down on cash shells limiting their size to £3m.

Allowing ever greater numbers of companies from faraway places such as Bermuda with limited at best transparency and disclosure to obtain a listing is an invitation to the con artist. Monitoring such companies is difficult, especially as they are mainly governed by local company laws, not those of the UK, and the impact of the listing requirements seems to be hard to detect.

It only emerged after the event that Rybak had sold 3.7m shares at 55p to 65p realising £2.5m in early October, days before dealings were suspended because of doubts over the ABN Amro transfer. These sales only emerged because of a planned takover by Langbar of another AIM company – Real Affinity (not much in fact). However, in reality Rybak appears to have unloaded perhaps as many as 25m shares since the flotation.

Red lights should have been flashing at the FSA and the Stock Exchange if anyone was at home as the Crown price collapsed amid the sequence of ever more curious announcements about the Brazilian deposits and the deals that never happened. Certainly by August, when the *Sunday Telegraph* turned a bright light on to Crown, there was enough for the so-called regulators to be taking pre-emptive steps to discover the truth. Meanwhile back at the appointments committee perhaps the message being contemplated should be: Not this year, Barry.

'Slicker'

Protecting the security of of your PayPal account is our primary concern, and we apologize for any incontinence it may cause.

Bogus website

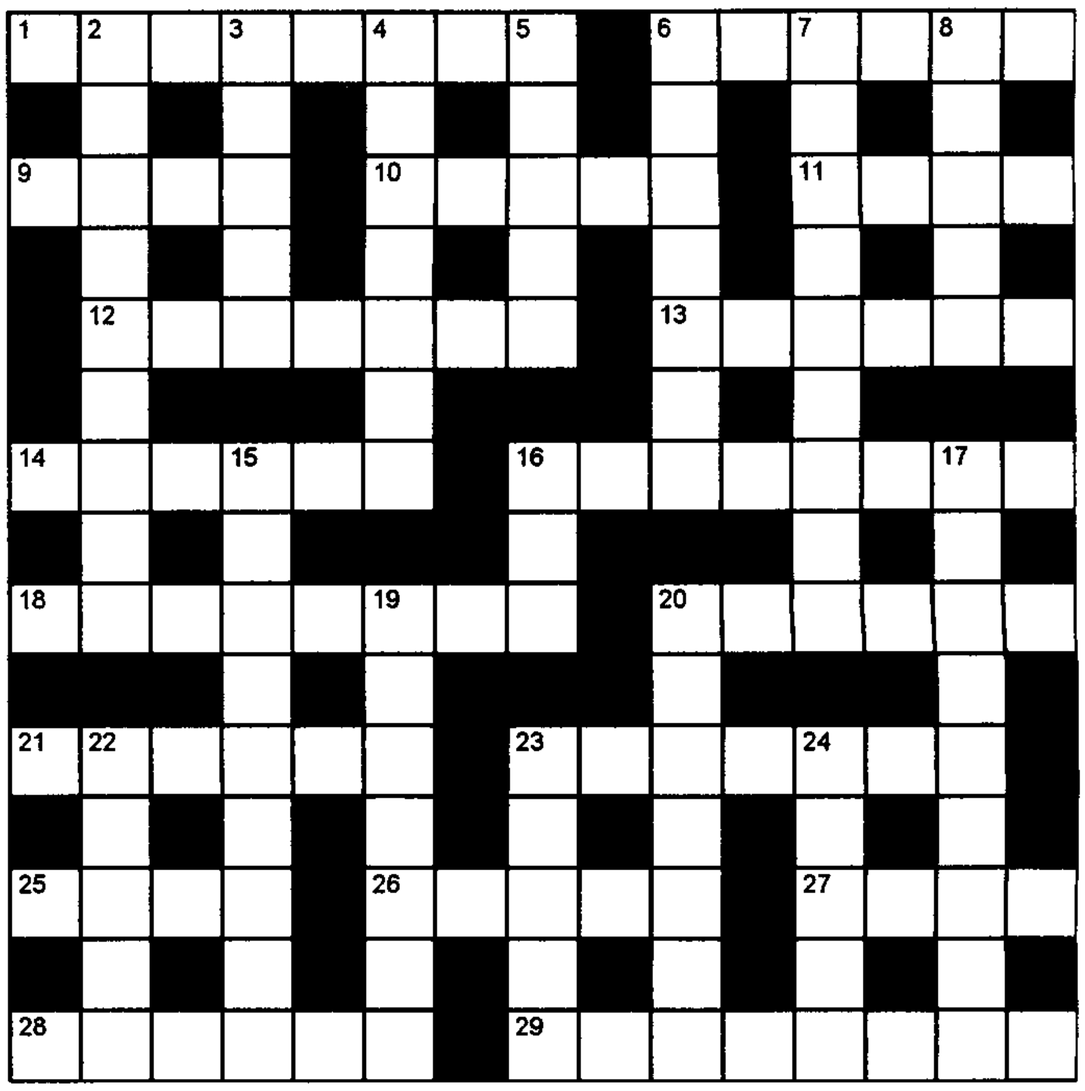
EYE CROSSWORD 302

by Cyclops

£100 prize to first correct solution opened on 15 December 2005

Entries to 'Crossword', Private Eye, 6 Carlisle Street, London W1D 3BN or via email to crossword@private-eye.co.uk

Next issue BUMPER CHRISTMAS £250 PRIZE CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Sudoku. etc. – country flipping lost, taking cocaine and getting plastered (8)
6/23ac. Having a go at old fogies playing sudoku? This is the drill (6,7)
9 See 21
10 Mutt (nothing on top) symbolic of USA (5)
11 "Head only for Bill" (the ex-president's totty) (4)
12 Pressing business in here for future drinkers? (4,3)
13 See 27
14 Ex-PM, as we know him, has Brenda's flipping lap dog almost nuzzling Brenda (6)
16 See 4
18 Romp in which one gets head of dick caught in fly (8)
20 A place for the football manager with tit on show (6)
21/9 Was a brown-noser having pee during sudoku, etc. pissed? (6,2,2)
23 See 6ac.
25 Brief shot, perhaps, of mother going round topless (4)
26 Leader of Conservatives left out influence, power, etc. (5)
27/28/13 Hard-on: too much sudoku completion will make it go down (4,2,4,6)
29 PM Tone's lost without one way to get relatively compliant cabinet colleagues (8)

DOWN

2 They're responsible for weight loss record with famous diet (9)
3 See 16dn.
4/16dac. Taken by piss-artist to be how to position two entries in a sudoku grid? (3,4,3,5)
5 Be really into sex and sudoku grid entry? (5)
6 Big erection, excessive, coming to large point (7)
7 Stiff after end of sudoku, look you, and climaxing (9)
8 Go on, drop Tony's top spiritual guide (5)
15 Fanny Feather's repression (9)
16/3 Brenda officially gives definitive head (3,5)
17 Ghouls are endlessly involved with sudoku's main type of figure (9)
19 Sudoku nuts possibly combine figures – it's about cheating initially (7)
20 PC support for office workers on the job? (7)
22 Castrate Kofi? (5)
23 Would-be leader somewhat rusty? (5)
24 One name given to Wogan's back passage (5)

Crossword 301 winner: PHILIP GERMAN

ACROSS: 1 Doggy-bag 6 Ad-libs 9 Sextet 10 On the job 11/12/21D Batting for both sides 13 Frontier 15 Cidery 16 Plunge 18 Rubbishy 20 Fart 21 Suspenders 23 Louis d'or 24 Boxers 25 Stages 26 Modestly.

DOWN: 2 Opera 3 Get it on 4 Bete noire 5/17 Good-for-nothing 6 Astor 7 Lie-abed 8 Blow torch 14 Roll about 15 Cobwebbed 18 Rostrum 19 Indexes 22 Rural.

Yobs

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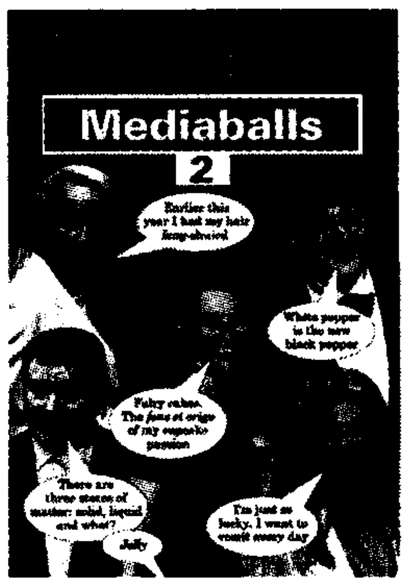
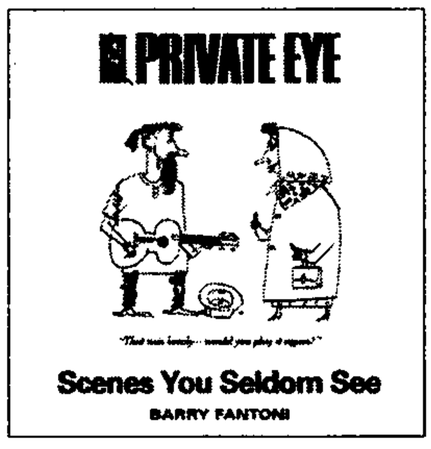
CRIME SOARS TO NEW LOW
DIANA ACCIDENT 'It was an accident' SENSATIONAL CLAIM
'I'M AT IT A THE TIME!' Says PM
THE CAMILLA I HAVE NEVE MET
CONSERVATIVE PARTY DIES
WHY 24-HOU THINKING WI BE A DISASTE
THE SUN ASKS IS DR WHO A PAEDO?
'I BLAME NO ONE' Says No One
WHY 'NON' MEAN OUI' Chirac Explai
PAXMAN INTERVIEWS GOD





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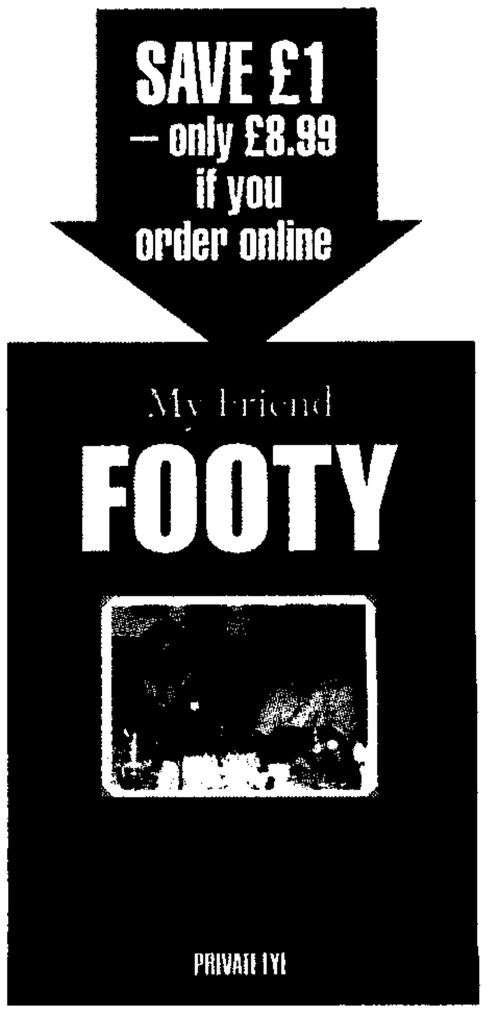

Book Signing

Ian Hislop, Barry Fantoni, Nick Newman, Richard Ingrams, Marcus Berkmann *et al* will be signing copies of this year's crop of satirical offerings from Private Eye Books on Tuesday 13 December 12.30-2.00pm.

SELFRIDGES (Basement), 400 Oxford Street, London W1.

Call 020 7318 3678 to reserve your copy.

OM SAI RAM

A fitting end to the ill-fitting British suit

A suitable man to spark a men's clothing revolution

Consider this proposition. Would you rather pay the same sum for a single, off-the-peg, chain store suit cut by a computer and sold to you by a spotty boy who thinks side vents are to be found on a Lambretta scooter, or for two bespoke, custom cut, hand-stitched suits, measured and sold to you by a man for whom suits are a lifetime's passion?

The British clothing chain store has a lot to fear from ***Mr. Raja M Daswani*** of Kowloon. If there were a global ambassador for men's suiting, Mr Daswani, who owns and runs Hong Kong's biggest tailoring business, would be that man. He and his family team measure and make hundreds of suits a week for discerning clients across the world.

Indeed, so successful is ***Mr. Daswani***, that – a little unnervingly as he is measuring you up – he freely admits he doesn't really need to work any more: 'My team is as experienced as I am. But I just love men's suits and I wouldn't feel right sitting at home. It's not a business. It's a mission.

'I love seeing customers walk in a really bad suit that cost them a fortune and walk out in one of our suits that's perfect in every way, made with a good heart in a superior fabric for a half or a quarter as much.'

The price of a Daswani shirt and suit are astonishing. We are talking from £19 (£25 including tax and duty) for a custom shirt and £129 (£169 including tax and duty) for a fully lined, made-to measure suit in a lightweight wool or linen, to £250 (£325 including tax and duty) for a 100 per cent wool, entirely hand finished suit in a British cloth, with every refinement from handmade button holes to knee lining. Even the most expensive suit, made in deluxe superfine wool for £1,500 (£1,950 including tax and duty), costs a third less than it would on **Savile Row**.

Raja Daswani may be based in Hong Kong, but his sartorial mission to the badly dressed and overpaying British customer brings him to the UK as often as once a month. He and his team take over hotel suites in major cities, so British customers can make an appointment and get the full Kowloon Monty.

Measurements and digital photos are taken here and emailed to Hong Kong. Often, your suit will be started on by a tailor 6,000 miles away before you've even left the hotel. You can have it couriered within a week or so, or wait for a second fitting when the Raja team hits your town again a few weeks later.

It now remains to see whether the Raja revolution, with its inspired mix of artistic flair, entrepreneurial genius and digital technology, will see the end of the off-the-peg British chain store suit. On price alone, it's a sartorial solution that will even please the Suits in accounts.

Business hours 10am - 8pm
(by appointment only)
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Mobile: ***07786 543258***
Tel: 0163 557 4233
Website: www.raja-fashions.com

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London Dec 10-16	Sheraton Park Tower Tel: 0207-235-8050
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Newcastle Dec 12-13	Hilton Newcastle Gateshead Tel: 0191-490-9700
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Oxford Jan 18-19	Oxford Old Bank Hotel Tel: 01865-799599
Swindon Jan 20-21	Swindon Marriott Hotel Tel: 0179-351-2121
Reading Jan 22-23	Holiday Inn Reading-South Tel: 0870-4009067
Brighton Jan 24-25	Hilton Brighton Metropole Tel: 0127-377-5432
So'ton Jan 26-27	Holiday Inn Hl So'ton Tel: 44-870-4009073
Exeter Jan 28-29	The Southgate Hotel, Exeter Tel: 0807-400-833
Bristol Jan 30-31	Bristol Marriott Hotel Tel: 0117-929-4281
Northampton Feb 1-2	Northampton Marriot Tel: 0870-400-7252
Cambridge Feb 3-4	Crowne Plaza Cambridge Tel: 01223-464-466
Norwich Feb 5-6	Holiday Inn Norwich Tel: 0870-400-9060
Ipswich Feb 7-8	Holiday Inn Ipswich Tel: 0870-400-5045
Dublin Feb 2-5	Dublin Four Seasons Hotel Tel: 353-1665-4000
Belfast Feb 6-7	Holiday Inn Tel: 028-9032-8511

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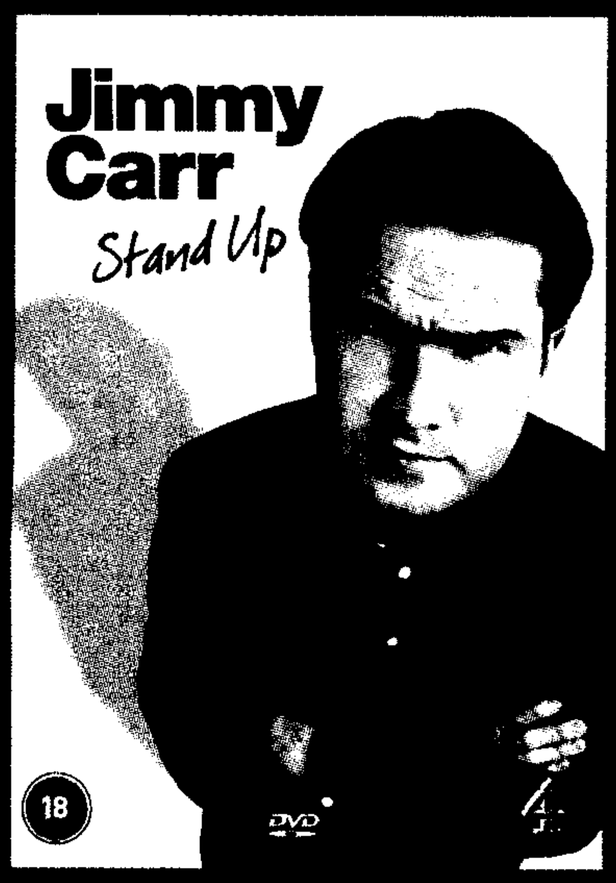
Top Dog for Christmas Gifts



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The Opera
DVD

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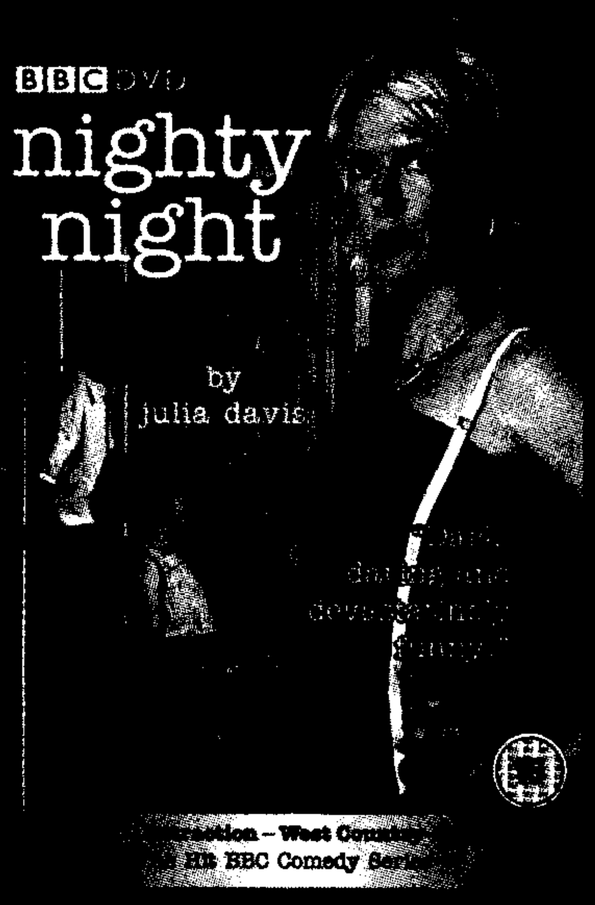
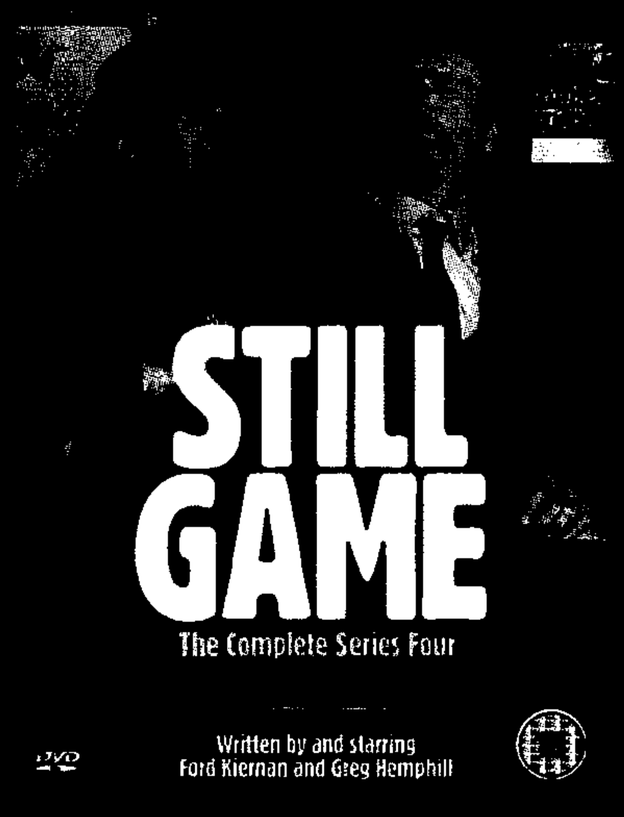


Nighty Night Series One
DVD



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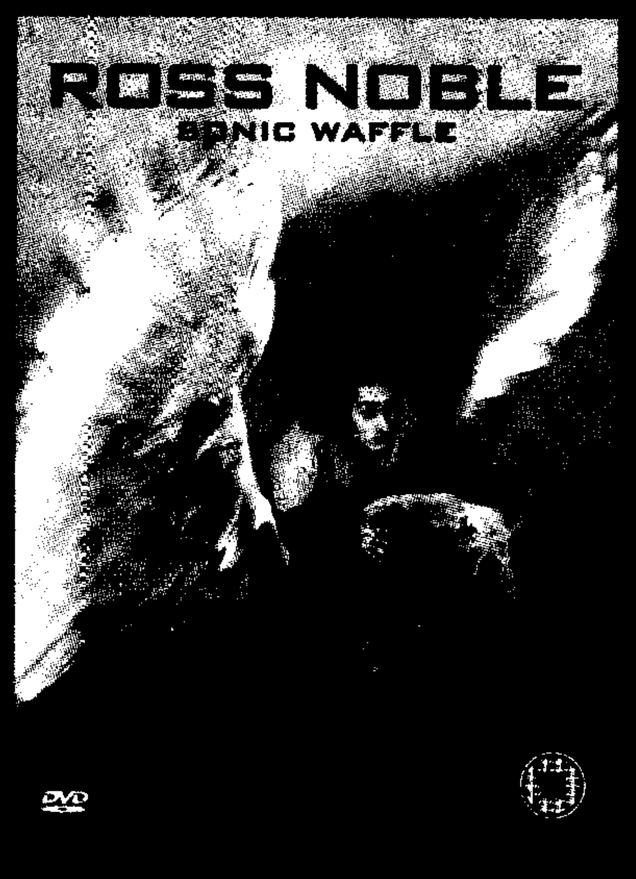

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